

# 理想回 上层生活

7  
燃乃回  
Tsunehiko Watanabe

Illustration 文倉十



# **Risou no Himo Seikatsu**

**– The Ideal Sponger Life –**

**- Volume 7 -**

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**[ Unlimited Novel Failures ]**

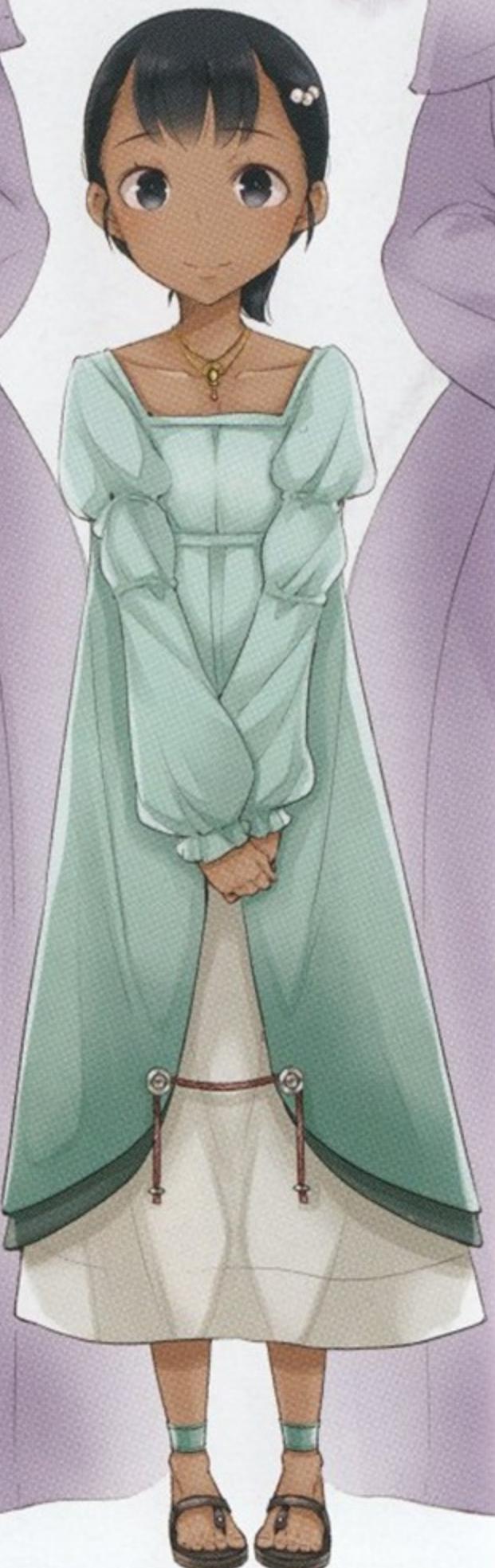
Tsunehiko Watanabe  
渡辺恒彦  
illustration 文倉十

# 理想回上王生活

7

「私は、ガジール辺境伯家次女、  
ニルダと申します」

少女はペコリと頭を下げた。  
短めのボニー・テールがピヨコンと揺れる。





「来ましたよ、  
姫様っ！」

フレア姫は突進してくる肉竜の進路上から、  
素早いサイドステップで身をかわすと、  
身体ごとぶつかるようにして長槍を肉竜に突き立てる。



「落ち着いてくれ

努めて平静を装ったアウラは、  
対面に座る丸顔の中年貴族をなだめた。

理想の  
ヒE生活の

理想の  
ヒE生活の

艶やかで豊かな黒髪。優しげな黒い双眸。  
美人と即答できるくらい容姿は整っている。



(この人が  
ルシンドさんか)

理想の  
ヒE生活の

「ええ、もちろんです、  
フレア殿下」

「ゼンジロウ様。  
お隣よろしい  
でしようか?」

フレア姫のドレスの裾が善治郎の足に  
触れている。いっそ、善治郎がその右腕を  
収まりが良さそうなくらいに  
両者の距離は近い。



INTRODUCTION

# ますます モテるヒモ男

大人気シリーズ・待望の第7弾。

6巻に続いて、善治郎のモテ男ぶりにさらに拍車が。

困難と一緒に乗り越えると、距離が大きく縮まるというが  
今回はまさにそのシチュエーション。

国家の一大事を回避すべく、  
善治郎が協力を要請したのがフレア姫だからだ。

果たして、一人はピンチを乗り越えることができるのか。  
そして、その仲はどうまで深まるのか。

女王アクラファンにはやきもきする展開の連続。  
なぜ善治郎は十代の王女に恋心を抱かれるのか――。

その魅力をひもといてみよう。

理想の  
王生活

理想のヒモ生活

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# 理想の 七E生活⑦

# Prologue

## On the Way There

The “Meat Dragon” was a four-legged herbivore dragon that had been domesticated as a livestock on the South Continent for its meat. It breed often, grew up quickly and most of its body could be eaten, so these characteristics earned it the name “Meat Dragon” against its will.

The majority of the meat that currently landed on the dining tables of the South Continent came from domesticated “Meat Dragons”, but needless to say, there were numerous wild “Meat Dragons” living in the wilderness as well.

It was extremely easily to differentiate between a wild Meat Dragon and a domesticated Meat Dragon: The wild ones still had their two horns growing on their heads while the domesticated ones had them cut off.

With their horns cut off, the Meat Dragons did not only lose their means for a physical attack, but also became less aggressive in their nature, which made it easier to rear them. Hence the horns of cultivated Meat Dragons were cut off after they reached a certain age. On the other hand, it meant that the wild Meat Dragons were surprisingly aggressive and dangerous.

The furious onslaught from a wild Meat Dragon with its two horns could sometimes even catch a hunter or soldier off-guard.

So a powerless villager would avoid any contact with wild Meat Dragons as much as possible.

But it would be completely different matter, when they banded together as an armed group. With a glint in their eyes, they would then kill the wild Meat Dragon.

The Carpa Kingdom had a lot more preserved food than the North Continent for example, since it was the biggest producer of salt and spices, but it was not all that pleasant to keep living off just them for a long time.

Forced to eat mainly jerked meat seasoned with salt and pepper along with dry

flatbread every day, the people started to see the initially dangerous wild Meat Dragons as nothing but a source for “juicy meat”.

And Zenjirou and his group on their way to the March of Guzzle were no exception.

As a result, the wild Meat Dragon, who carelessly had revealed itself from the forest along the Salt Road, was hunted by the soldiers with bloodshot eyes.

“GROWL!”

“There it is!”

“Don’t let it get away!”

“It’s coming your way, get ready!”

Several soldiers were chasing after one Meat Dragon in the thick forest besides the Salt Road.

An experienced hunter would immobilize it with a trap and finish it off with arrows from afar, but the ordinary soldiers took a more primitive approach: Cursorial Hunting.

“Uwah!?”

“It’s friggin’ huge!”

“Don’t you dare to let it get away!”

With their brandished spears, the soldiers chevied the Meat Dragon towards the road from all sides.

A silver-haired girl and a blonde female soldier were awaiting it on the road.

Princess Freya, the silver-haired girl, could neither conceal her tension, nor her excitement, as she held a long spear that was almost twice the height of herself with both hands.

"Here it comes, Milady. Maybe I should take over after all?"

Skathi, the blonde female soldier standing next to her, took one step forward as though protecting her master with the short spear and wooden shield in her hands, when she called out to her like that.

But Princess Freya firmly shook her head in light of the consideration of her trusted retainer, so that her short silver hair fluttered about.

"No, let me do this, Skathi. I will not get another chance to take down a dragon like this again."

Even more than nervousness, her two eyes, fixated on the forest before her, revealed an eager glint of excitement while she said that.

"Very well. From what I have heard, the Meat Dragon seems to behave like a boar. Please do not face it head-on, but rather attack it from the side with your spear."

"Yes, I know."

With the approval of her bodyguard, the princess from the Northern Continent showed a smile consisting of nervousness and elation alike, and glared into the thick forest.

"GROWL!"

A few moments later, it appeared in the forest near the road.

The wild Meat Dragon proudly bore the two horns on its head forward and jumped out onto the road while breaking through the thick branchwood with its massive body.

"Watch out, Milady!"

"Y- Yes!"

Princess Freya definitely was nervous, when she saw a wild dragon for the first time.

The comparison to a boar had been suitable, seeing as it rushed at her in a straight line with its small round eyes bloodshot with agitation. Its appearance was quite redolent of the dinosaur called "triceratops" that had lived on Earth a long time ago.

But unlike the triceratops, it had no horn on its nose.

The biggest difference between a Meat Dragon and a boar was the size.

Assuming the Meat Dragon in front of Princess Freya had the size of an average specimen of his race, it meant that the Meat Dragon was two or three times bigger than a boar.

“GROOOWL!”

When the Meat Dragon rushed straight at her with a battle cry, Princess Freya inadvertently raised the corners of her mouths into a crescent-shaped smile.

At home, they only had her let hunt rabbits, foxes or a deer at best, but here, she was allowed to face a dragon, even if it was only a herbivore one.

A shiver of excitement ran down her spine and she suppressed the urge to launch an attack herself. Instead she peered hard at the approaching huge dragon with the long spear in hand.

“GROWL!”

“Now!”

She evaded the Meat Dragon by quickly stepping out of its path and then stabbed her long spear into the side of the dragon at full tilt.

“Hah!”

“GRRR!”

Her all-out attack perfectly pierced the left shoulder of the dragon.

But even though the attack from the light-weighted princess did harm the Meat Dragon, it did not finish it off.

“Huh?”

Moreover, she was suddenly in the path of its onslaught again, either because she had not stepped away far enough before or because she had pressed forward too far for

her attack afterwards.

The watching female soldier reacted to the predicament faster than the person in question herself.

“Milady! Down!”

She was ordering her master like a pet dog, but given the circumstances, it could not be helped.

“Yes!”

Princess Freya obediently did like she was told and ducked down, practically throwing herself onto the ground.

“Hah!”

In the next moment, the leg of the female soldier swept over the ducked back of her master like a gust of wind.

Skathi was pretty much a giant of a woman, but even then, her body mass was not even a quarter of the Meat Dragon. It definitely was impossible for her to stop the onslaught of the dragon head-on.

But she could at least deflect it to the side for a bit by using a technique that applied all of her bodyweight to the impact of her leg.

“GRR!”



Skathi performed a perfect textbook example of a roundhouse kick, kicking the Meat Dragon right into its side.

Just like she had planned, her attack deflected the onslaught of the Meat Dragon to the side and it staggered past the ducked princess.

After the combined attack from Princess Freya's spear and Skathi's leg, the Meat Dragon tripped over its own legs and fell flat onto the road. It seemed that it was not dead yet, seeing as it convulsed in pain on the ground with the white of its eyes showing, but it had obviously lost consciousness.

"Well done, Milady. Now, please finish it off before it wakes up again."

The tall female warrior held out her hand to her prostrated master.

"Thank you, Skathi. But now it counts as your kill and not mine, or am I wrong?"

Princess Freya stood up with Skathi's help, casually wiped the dirt off her cheeks with her sleeve and uttered displeased with puckered lips.

It certainly looked like the kick from Skathi had been the decisive blow.

Her grumbling was not met with a response from Skathi, but from a soldier of the Carpa Kingdom, who had chased the Meat Dragon here.

"Not at all, Princess Freya. You inflicted a lethal wound on the Meat Dragon without doubt. It would have only been a matter of time until it died. Miss Victoria merely intervened to protect you."

In view of that, Princess Freya squatted down near the Meat Dragon and examined the piercing wound she herself had inflicted on it.

"...I see. That certainly seems to be the case."

Looking at the collapsed dragon confirmed that her spear had pierced into its flesh quite deeply. Apparently the soldier had not been flattering her, when he had said that her spear attack had inflicted a lethal wound.

"Okay. Then..."

Princess Freya honestly acknowledged their pleas and drew her favourite hatchet from its holster at her waist.

"Where do I have to stab it to kill it? I have to admit that it is my first time going up against a dragon."

"Right here in the back of the neck, Your Highness. Are you sure that you do not want to use a iron spear instead?"

The soldier asked her worriedly. His concern was reasonable. It was by no means an easy task to finish off a large dragon with a strong vitality.

But Princess Freya just smiled warmly.

"I appreciate your concern, but I will be fine. This is my speciality."

With these words, she confidently raised up her right hand holding her favourite hatchet in a fluent motion.

As a matter of fact, Princess Freya was not lying. As a svenskar and a woman, she had a rather petite physique, so her overall fighting capacity was no better than an ordinary soldier, no matter how harsh she may train, but at least her skill with the hatchet was first-rate. Moreover, it absolutely suited her personality.

Hence she had never failed to finish off her "prey" with it, whether it was a two-legged or four-legged animal. And her achievement was not tainted on the South Continent, either.

"So, right here? Okay, here I go!"

Princess Freya swiftly struck with her hatchet and severed the neck of the Meat Dragon with one strike just like the soldier had recommended.

While Princess Freya worked up a sweat in the dragon hunt, Zenjirou patiently waited inside the carriage at the side of the road for its conclusion.

The young girl was bravely participating in the hunt, whereas the grown-up man holed up inside the dragon carriage. This sounded rather pathetic by itself, but as a matter

of fact, Zenjirou would be of no help and just a burden, even if he were to go out there, because he did not even know proper self-defence.

He could only make himself useful by letting the princess protect him.

Zenjirou wriggled about on his chair inside the wide carriage a bit uncomfortable, when he suddenly heard the cheers of the soldiers from outside before long.

“Natalio?”

“Yes, it seems the hunt has ended successfully. It should be fine to head outside now. Will you go out, Master Zenjirou?”

Zenjirou agreed with Natalio sitting across from him.

“Indeed. You will take the lead, Natalio, Ines.”

“Yes, Sire.”

“Understood.”

Prompted like that, the knight and maid sitting across from him stood up together.

The dragon carriage Zenjirou was currently boarding was a huge carriage drawn by eight dragons for royalty only.

Its ceiling was so high that a grown-up man did not need to worry about bumping his head, when standing up.

The whole carriage was actually so big that a person from Modern Earth would rather associate it with a passenger wagon of a train than a carriage.

Just in case, Knight Natalio left the carriage first and checked, whether the situation was under control.

“Everything is alright, Master Zenjirou.”

“Good.”

Hearing his words, Zenjirou also got off the carriage.

“Phew, so bright.”

Stepping out of the carriage into the midday sun, he blinked a few times, because his eyes watered from the sudden change in light.

While he squinted against the sun, the soldiers, who had guarded the carriage so far, gathered around him and formed a protective wall.

As a former commoner, Zenjirou felt extremely uncomfortable to be flanked by armed soldiers at all sides, but now that he was royalty, it was a given that he was accompanied by so many guards, whenever he went outside.

Knight Natalio was leading the guards. For now, he was the only knight that had sworn loyalty to Zenjirou himself.

The guards, starting with Knight Natalio, stayed at his side by the same distance to him at all times, even without any directions.

Whether he slowed down, because he looked around, stopped for a moment, because of a misstep, or quickened his pace, because he wanted to gloss over his misstep, the circle of soldiers around him never got into a state of disorder.

Even if he were to suddenly start sprinting, it was unlikely he would be able to shake them off.

So Zenjirou advanced on the “Salt Road”, chaperoned by these diligent soldiers.

“Feels like I hit upon a wide forest trail on my way to my mountain cabin.”

Walking on the road of soil overgrown with weeds, Zenjirou mumbled to himself. People of Modern Earth rarely got to see roads that were not asphalted.

Zenjirou came from a country village in the middle of nowhere, but even there, the main road had properly been asphalted. You would only come across a holey path of soil as a cart track between fields or an abandoned mountain track.

And because he was still not used to wearing the leather boots of this world, Zenjirou struggled along a bit clumsily, when the maid Ines suddenly passed by him.

She outpaced him with a normal walking pace, so Zenjirou felt no need to reprimand

her about it and just let it slide.

Overtaking her master, the maid smoothly went over to Knight Natalio keeping watch in front of Zenjirou, and whispered a word or two into his ear.

“!?”

Knight Natalio gave a jerk to her words for a moment, but in the next moment, he pulled an arrow out of the quiver on his back, quickly nocked it and send it towards the crown of a tree.

“Hah!”

The arrow was released with a small outcry from Knight Natalio and hit the “something” that was hiding high up in the treetop.

“GYA!?”

That “something” raised a shrill scream from high up and fell straight down to the side of the road.

Zenjirou impulsively stopped in his track, when he heard that scream and its thud.

Standing protective before Zenjirou, Knight Natalio still kept the dragon bow in his left hand ready and gave orders to the cautious soldiers near by.

“It was a ‘Thieving Dragon’. I think I finished it off, but you three, go take a look. Kill it if it is still alive. Everyone else, keep your eyes peeled!”

“Yes, Sir!”

With the instructions from Knight Natalio, three of the soldiers guarding Zenjirou rushed over to the side of the road.

“Hmp!”

“GII...”

Apparently it was still alive as one of the soldiers impaled it with the short spear in his hands.

“All clear. It’s dead now!”

When the soldier waved his hand with these words, Knight Natalio acted as well.

“Master Zenjirou, the danger has been averted. Please move on.”

“O- Okay.”

Overwhelmed by the all too fast development in front of his eyes, Zenjirou nodded absentmindedly and picked up the pace again.

Before long, he arrived at the side of the road, where it had fallen down.

“Well, this... is not a pretty sight.”

Seeing the dead dragon, Zenjirou frowned unconsciously.

“The ‘Thieving Dragon’ is an outcast of the forest in more than one way after all.”

Knight Natalio consented to Zenjirou with a wry smile.

In fact, it was quite the eerie sight.

Almost half as big as a grown man, its whole body was covered by dark green scales, so it was a dragon aka. reptile, but its physique was closer to that of a monkey.

Short legs and long arms coupled with a long and narrow tail. It had the typical build of an animal living on top of trees, but the face was that of a lizard.

As it was already dead, its long forked tongue hung out limply from its pointed snout, which only added to its eeriness.

“An outcast of the forest? So its appearance is not the only issue?”

Knight Natalio nodded shortly to the question from Zenjirou.

"Yes. As its name implies, it is a dragon that steals. It hides itself in the crown of the trees and attacks its prey from above, when it passes by. They are pretty daring in their efforts, so even pack animals like carnivore dragons fall an easy prey to them and get their eggs or nestlings stolen.

Needless to say, we humans are no exception. Children or small women are targeted by the 'Thief Dragons' first and if there is no such target, they go for the next best prey. In other words, they steal a 'part of their prey' by tearing it off with their sharp fangs."

In case of humans, a part would probably be an arm or the head.

Zenjirou grimaced terrified in light of the explanation from Knight Natalio.

"That... sounds dreadful. I am glad you killed it, Natalio."

"It was not me, but Ines, who noticed the 'Thieving Dragon'. Please direct these words at her."

Surprised by the knight's words, Zenjirou shifted his gaze to the middle-age attendant, but came to a realisation at the same time.

Earlier, Ines had suddenly passed him from behind to whisper something into the ear of Knight Natalio at the front. At that time, she must have told him about the Thieving Dragon.

"I just happened to spot it. If anything, I say Sir Natalio deserves the praise for his swift and accurate reaction."

Ines shook her head with wry smile and praised the skills of Knight Natalio like that.

"Yes, certainly."

Looking up the tree, Zenjirou was convinced by her words.

Even the smaller ones amongst the big trees standing on both sides of the road were at least bigger than an electricity pole, whereas the bigger ones were sometimes twice as big.

Knight Natalio had sent an arrow up that high and had hit the vitals of the "Thieving Dragon" with his bow, so his masterful skills were beyond all question. Moreover, he

had done so quite quickly without taking proper aim at the hidden “Thieving Dragon”.

Even if you took into consideration that he was using a superior dragon bow, it was still quite the feat.

“It’s reassuring. Unfortunately I am no stronger than a woman or a child, so I will be counting on you well and truly.”

“Yes, Sire. Please rest assured. I will protect you, even if it costs my life.”

While talking with Knight Natalio like that, Zenjirou moved along the road and in time, Princess Freya and the others came into sight.

Princess Freya noticed him first of all and waved with a bright smile.

“Ahaha...”

Zenjirou waved back, but his face was showing a dry smile.

“Her Highness Freya seems to be quite the active person.”

Maid Ines interjected somewhat far-fetched, to which Zenjirou nodded assenting without breaking his dry smile.

“Yeah, her vigour sure is to be envied.”

The hand the smiling princess waved with was firmly holding the blood-smeared hatchet.

# Chapter 1

## Arrival

Aside from some encounters with wild dragons, Zenjirou and his group arrived safely in the March of Guzzle without any further incidents.

The capital of the March of Guzzle was a city fortified with high walls.

Needless to say, it was nothing out of the ordinary. The South Continent was housing obviously hostile creatures in form of dragons, so every human settlement in the borderlands was protected by walls to a greater or lesser extent.

On top of that, the building of the feudal lord in the middle of the capital resembled a fortress, symbolizing the fortitude and straightforwardness of the Guzzle Family.

In other words, it was a fortification within a fortification.

That fortress was quite large, giving the townspeople the opportunity to withdraw there in case of need, but it had practically no pompous beautification.

Truth be told, it deserved the term “shabby”, when comparing it to the Royal or Inner Palace, where Zenjirou usually spent his time, or even the Mansion in Valentia, where he had stayed for a month not long ago.

But Zenjirou was glad to be in a proper building again after he had spent the last few days in the bumpy carriage and foreign wilderness.

Having reached his destination, he finally cast off his travelling attire and heaved a sigh of relief.

“Hah, sweet freedom...”

In the building allocated to him within the residence of the feudal lord, Zenjirou sloppily got rid of his shoes and socks, flopped himself onto the couch and rested his

bare feet on the low table.

He rarely ever displayed such an ill-mannered behaviour, not even in his Inner Palace, but right now, he was too tired to care. The ride in the carriage without proper suspension and the unfamiliar camping outside had exhausted his stamina and mind to the limit.

“You have done well, Master Zenjirou. Would you like some water?”

Waiting Maid Ines gave a warm smile and offered him a silver goblet with cold water.

She and Zenjirou were currently the only ones in the room. In front of the acquainted maid of the Inner Palace, he could unwind.

“Yeah, thanks, Ines. But I’ve to say, you sure are tough. You should actually be even more tired than me, since you took care of me the whole time.”

Saying this, Zenjirou looked up to the waiting maid standing next to the couch.

Just like he had mentioned, the dignified appearance of Ines showed not the slightest hint of exhaustion.

The middle-aged maid showed a faint smile in reaction to the appreciation of her master.

“Well, I am used to it. I have been serving Her Majesty Aura on the battlefield during the previous war as well.”

“Oh, wow. Not bad.”

Zenjirou was honestly surprised at the confession from Ines. He was certainly surprised, but at the same time, he made sense of it. Ines surely had been sent with him this and last time, because she had that kind of backbone.

The attendance in the wilderness would be difficult for a normal waiting maid that had never left the Royal or Inner Palace before.

Ines took the empty goblet out of Zenjirou's hand and said.

"It seems that you will be staying in this building. I am sure there will be all kind of inconveniences, but please bear with it."

"Yeah, I know. It's no problem. I expected this from the beginning."

Still slumping down in the couch sloppily, Zenjirou answered Ines like that.

The oldest daughter of the Guzzle Family, Lucinda, was going to marry General Puyol. Zenjirou had come all the way to the March of Guzzle to attend their marriage ceremony.

It goes without saying that General Puyol was the guest of honour this time around. Hence the main building of the residence of the feudal lord was used by General Puyol and his relatives as well as the Guzzle Family itself.

So it was inevitable that Zenjirou was placed in the adjacent building, even as royalty. He usually did not need all that much personal space, so the annex building was not bothering him at all.

He had been a bit perplexed, when he found out that the building had no own bath, but they were going to prepare a bathtub for him every day, so he could put up with it. Of course he would refuse to live his life in a house without a bath, but it was no reason to become willful, when he was just staying in it for the period of his visit.

"Fuh..."

For a while, he just lazed around on the couch, when Ines suddenly called out to him.

"Master Zenjirou. I am sorry to interrupt your rest, but I think it is about time the Guzzle Family will send a messenger to welcome you."

Please compose your clothing a bit. Even casual wear will be alright."

"Oh, already that late? Got it."

With these words, Zenjirou reached out for some socks and indoor shoes.

The only maid he had brought along from the Inner Palace on this occasion was Ines.

After all, the marriage between the eldest daughter of a feudal lord and a brass hat of the military was a big event, so an unbelievable number of nobles was rushing for the March of Guzze.

The capital of the March of Guzze was built to withstand long-time sieges, so it was big enough to accommodate that unbelievable amount of nobles, but it did not change the fact that the guests were putting a large strain on the capacity of their sleeping quarters as well as food provisions.

Because of that, the number of servants they brought along was supposed to be kept to a bare minimum.

Zenjirou fixed his attire and sat down on the couch again, mannerly this time. Before long, the door was knocked.

Three women entered the room. Two of them were obviously past their youth, but the third one was a girl so small that she still looked like a child.

Although they might as well be mother and daughter in age, it was obvious at a glance that the little girl was the important figure of them. For one thing she was standing in the middle, for another thing she alone was wearing different clothes.

The two middle-aged women wore something plain, almost like an uniform, whereas the girl was wearing a dress of clearly superior cloth, even if its design was simple.

She was not a mere messenger, but obviously the daughter of a noble.

(Is she the child of a branch family?)

While this thought crossed Zenjirou's mind, the girl opened her mouth with an expression stiff from nervousness.

"It- It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Master Zenjirou. My name is Nilda, the second daughter of the Guzze Family.

My father has asked me to take care of you during your stay here. Please just say the

word, if you need anything."

She must have practiced it beforehand. Despite her nervousness, the little girl, Nilda smoothly delivered her speech without stuttering and then lowered her head politely so that her short ponytail swung around.

"Okay. Then I shall take you up on your offer. By the way, could it be that you are the little sister of Lady Lucinda and Sir Xavier, seeing as you said that you are the second daughter?"

Zenjirou was puzzled by her introduction at heart, but kept his composure on the outside for now as he asked this.

Unaware of these inner thoughts of the Prince Consort, the little girl widened her already large black eyes even further

"Yes, quite so! Although our mothers are different, Lucinda is my older sister and Xavier is my older brother!"

and replied like that in an energetic voice. Judging by her expression seized with pride and joy, she seemed to harbour an honest affection for Lucinda and Xavier.

It was not uncommon that siblings of different mothers were harbouring complicated feelings towards each other in High Society, but that did not seem to be the case for the Guzzle Family.

"Sir Xavier looked after me in Valentia. If the chance arises, I would like to speak to him again."

"Thank you for your kind words. I will relay it to my brother."

Nilda smiled even happier as a result of his words.

"Then I already have the first request. Can you arrange a bath for me? I worked up a sweat on the way here and would like to wash it off before dinner."

"Yes, of course. I shall arrange for it immediately."

When Zenjirou requested that, the petite girl straightened herself and bowed with a jerk. Then she left the room together with the two middle-aged servants.

“...Ines.”

Zenjirou remained silent for a while after Nilda and the other two were gone, then called out the name of the waiting maid standing next to him with a stern expression.

“Yes, what is the matter, Master Zenjirou?”

“Her Majesty Aura has briefed me about the important people of the Guzzle Family prior to this. However, a Nilda Guzzle was not amongst them.

Can I assume that Her Majesty purposefully did not tell me about her?”

He was alone with Ines now, but he still kept the attitude and tone of Royalty, so she must have discerned the importance of his question from that.

The faithful maid kept her stern expression, when she immediately shook her head to the question of her master.

“No. I dare to say that is not the case. Her Majesty Aura has no reason to keep her existence from you, even if she is the daughter of a mistress.”

Zenjirou relaxed his shoulders a bit relieved, when Ines answered him flat out.

Aura was his beloved wife, but before that, she was also the Queen of a country, so he did understand that she obviously kept some things from him or schemed some ploys unknown to him, but at the same time, it was obviously not a pleasant feeling to have your wife do that to you.

Hence he immediately felt better, when that possibility was ruled out.

“Then she did not cause this misinformation on purpose. The easiest explanation would be that it ‘slipped her mind to tell me’...”

"Her Majesty is only human, too, after all, so that possibility is not unthinkable, but I would say we can rule it out for now, because Secretary Fabio is with her."

"Then the only other explanation is that Her Majesty did not know about her, either... Is that even possible? That Her Majesty does not know about a child from an influential feudal lord?"

Zenjirou cocked his head doubtful, whereupon Ines responded with a businesslike tone.

"It is relatively well-known, when an illegitimate child does not get acknowledged. But it is also not unheard of that a feudal lord tried to conceal his child from Royalty in the past, either."

But in neither of these cases, they would have made Lady Nilda appear before you like this.

So it would mean that she is abiding by some kind of conspiracy, but for that, Lady Nilda showed no guilt in her eyes and behaved straightforward, even if a bit nervous. And above all, the Guzzle Family is not known for acting underhanded like this, so I believe that possibility is extremely unlikely as well."

"In the end, this got us nowhere."

"So it would seem."

The situation was obviously strange, but the other party was not behaving conspicuous, so their intentions were not perceptible.

"....."

Slumping deep into the couch, Zenjirou pondered for a while with his hand against his chin, but in the end, there was only one conclusion he could arrive at.

"I will inform Her Majesty Aura and await her instructions. Until then, we will not stir up this matter any further."

“Very well. I will prepare everything at once.”

Like always, Zenjirou was going to rely on Aura's judgment. Ines just lowered her head respectfully.

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Evening of the same day.

After washing off the sweat from the travel in the bathtub, Zenjirou had taken a short nap to relieve his fatigue. Now waiting maid Ines woke him up and informed him about the dinner plans.

“Ehm, in other words, today's dinner will be an ‘open-air banquet hosted by Princess Freya’ in the garden of this building?”

“Yes. Or more precisely, Princess Freya does want to hold it like that and is awaiting your approval for it.

We still have a lot of the smoked meat of the ‘Meat Dragon’ from the other day left over, so she suggested we share it with everyone. Well, if you are against it, the whole meat will just be gifted to the Guzzle Family.”

“Oh, that meat.”

A few days ago, Princess Freya had killed a wild Meat Dragon along the Salt Road and Zenjirou still had not forgotten about it.

Most of the killed dragon had been consumed for dinner on that very day, but they had smoked the leftovers and put them into the supply cart.

Apparently Princess Freya wanted to host a great banquet with that smoked meat now.

“I do not really mind giving my permission for it, but what are the respective consequences for allowing or refusing it?”

The middle-aged maid smoothly answered the question from her master without pause.

"Well, considering that the banquet shall be held in the garden, you would have to invite Lady Nilda, because she is responsible for this building, as well as some other nobles, too.

And when Princess Freya is the host of such an event with your permission, it will only reinforce their impression that she will be your concubine.

On the other hand, if you were to refuse it, it will give the opposite impression. Namely that you have reservations towards Princess Freya."

"I see..."

Zenjirou could not help but grimace in reaction to the detailed explanation from the waiting maid.

In short, he would practically be announcing to the guests that he himself was welcoming Princess Freya as his concubine, if he were to accept her request.

He would literally do away with himself with that decision, seeing as he actually did not want to take a concubine.

Then he should just refuse her request. But unfortunately, it was not that simple. Refusing her in turn would be like officially announcing that he did not accept Princess Freya.

Queen Aura herself had officially recognized her concubine matter insofar as allowing her to attend this marriage ceremony as a partner for Zenjirou.

If Zenjirou were to reject Princess Freya in the open now, it would give other people the misunderstanding that the Queen and her Prince Consort had a conflict of opinions.

"Fine. Tell her she has my permission."

In the end, Zenjirou could only do this, even if he knew that he was putting his own head in the noose.

His own self-interest against the reputation of the Queen. It goes without saying which he ought to prioritize.

His waiting maid lowered her head briefly in light of her master's response.

"Understood, Master Zenjirou. I will convey it to her."

"Good."

With this short reply, Zenjirou stood up from the couch and started to change his clothes.

By now, he had gotten less reluctant to let the maids see him in pyjamas or underwear, so he blatantly took off his blue-striped pyjama and let Ines help him put on the traditional clothes of the Carpa Kingdom.

These clothes were the same as the third official attire he often wore in the Royal Palace, but with less decoration and easier to move in. Zenjirou had gotten used to the traditional clothes lately, so he had faith in himself to put them on by himself, but according to the waiting maids of the Inner Palace, it would turn into a "scandal", if he were to appear in public after putting them on without their help.

While changing his clothes, he made some small-talk with Ines.

"Are you getting along well with Princess Freya, Master Zenjirou?"

"Hmm. I'm sure we've grown pretty close on the way here. After all, we spent several days together in the same carriage. And I don't really dislike her personality, anyway."

He was being honest, when he said that.

Her behaviour and choice of words was certainly sophisticated, but Princess Freya did not really beat around the bush like nobility usually did, liked to move around and displayed a variety of expression, so Zenjirou was by no means put off by her.

"Then there should be no problem to accept her as a concubine, right?"

But he firmly shook his head in reaction to the question from Ines.

"These are two different things altogether. The problem is not my feelings towards her,

but my fear of disrupting our domestic peace by taking a second wife."

It would work out, if they were "a happily married couple + a woman on friendly terms with both of them", but Zenjirou could not envision a bright future, when "two women loved the same man", no matter how well these two women might actually get along.

He did acknowledged the difference in their culture and moral values in the head, but his heart had a hard time catching up to it.

"It's really comfortable in the Inner Palace with Aura, Zenkichi and me right now.

I know Princess Freya is a good girl, but to be honest, I'm scared to add her to our harmonic family."

Ines narrowed her eyes to slits, like being blinded, when Zenjirou gave her his honest opinion.

"You sure love Her Majesty Aura and Prince Carlo-Zen from the bottom of your heart."

"Ah, well, yeah. Oh, speaking of Zenkichi, you always call him Carlo-Zen."

Embarrassed by the straight compliment, Zenjirou stammered a bit and quickly changed the topic.

Carlos Zenkichi. In short, Carlo-Zen. In fact, Zenjirou was the only one calling him Zenkichi and about everyone else called him Carlos. Ines was actually one of the very few that referred to him as Carlo-Zen.

Zenjirou had brought up the matter without any ulterior motive. He just had wanted to change the topic, but it was somewhat meaningful for Ines.

"You are right. The title of 'Princess Carlos' always reminds me of His late Majesty Carlos II. after all."

With a distant look in her eyes, Ines uttered melancholic.

"His Majesty Carlos II.? You mean Aura's predecessor? Now that you mention it, they do have the same name. Ah, but shouldn't it be 'His Majesty Carlos' instead of 'Prince Carlos' for him?"

Recalling the knowledge he learned from Lady Octavia, Zenjirou asked this, whereupon Ines shook her head a bit, the distant look still in her eyes.

"Yes, you are right. But His Majesty had only assumed the throne for less than a year. I was always calling him 'Prince Carlos', back then when I served him."

"Say what!? You have served the late king?"

He widened his eyes in surprise, but it was actually only normal that she did.

Ines was ten years older than Aura, so it was not all that surprising that she had served a different master before Aura.

"Yes. That is why I cannot help but recall His Late Majesty, when I hear the title 'Prince Carlos', so I would rather use the address of 'Prince Carlo-Zen'. If you have a problem with it, I can correct myself, though?"

She asked him that, but Zenjirou shook his head with a smile.

"No, keep it up. I was just curious about it."

No matter what she called him, it was beyond all question that Ines treated his son with respect and affection, so there was no need to stick at such trifles.

She must have noticed the faith he put in her.

"Thank you very much, Master Zenjirou. Okay, we are done now."

After helping him dress up, Ines showed a warm smile and lowered her head a bit.

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For High Society, it was nothing special to host a banquet in the garden, so the yard of the annex building in the residence of the Guzzle Family had all the necessary equipment as well.

Well, it was just a well for washing the ingredients, a counter for preparing the food and a stone hearth for cooking, but it was enough to do some simple cooking like a barbecue without problems.

The roasting meat and vegetables gave off an aromatic smell while the fire illuminated the smiling face of Princess Freya, which Zenjirou was observing from a bit apart.

“Okay, it looks done. I will slice it up, so please give me a moment.”

Princess Freya truly seemed to enjoy herself in the role of the head chef. With a smile on her face the whole time, she moved around busily while her short silver hair was dyed red by the fire.

She was supposed to be true-blood royalty, but her bright smile as she sliced the meat was genuine without doubt.

(Maybe she likes cooking?)

A large silhouette approached Zenjirou while he harboured that thought.

“Your Majesty Zenjirou, if you would like, please take this.”

He was offered a silver plate with a meat and vegetable skewer by a woman so tall he had to look up to her. It was Victoria Kronqvist alias Skathi.

“Oh, Miss Victoria. Thanks.”

Zenjirou took the skewer from the plate the trusted retainer of Princess Freya held out to him and thanked her while holding up the skewer.

“No, I should be thanking you, Your Majesty.

Thank you very much for allowing the Milady to host this banquet tonight.

I am expressing the greatest gratitude in place of my master.”

The female warrior solemnly lowered her head with these words, whereas Zenjirou cocked his head puzzled with the skewer still in hand.

By allowing her to host this banquet, Zenjirou had taken another step forward to

accepting Princess Freya as his concubine, but he got the feeling that Skathi was not thanking him for that reason.

“...I am not familiar with the culture of the North Continent, but does an open-air banquet happen to have some kind of special meaning to it there?”

Zenjirou wondered, if he had been deceived, so he automatically asked this with a somewhat stiff voice, but the tall woman shook her head unintimidated.

“No, Your Majesty. You have nothing to fear from it.

But it is indeed somewhat special. You see, the Milady has always dreamed of hosting an official banquet with the prey she had finished off herself.

In our country, only ‘warriors’ are giving that privilege.”

He more or less discerned what Skathi was getting at. After taking a bite from the skewer and chewing it thoroughly, he opened his mouth.

“...That means Princess Freya is not a warrior? Our soldiers were praising her spearmanship, when she finished off the Meat Dragon, though.”

In the Carpa Kingdom, women could never become warriors, but it should be different for their motherland, the Uppsala Kingdom. After all Skathi, the woman in front of him, had proclaimed to be a “warrior” herself.

She must have realized why Zenjirou asked that.

Skathi shook her head with a small smile.

“Milady certainly does have the minimum fitness to fight. But a woman cannot become a ‘warrior’ with that.

For a woman to become a warrior, she needs to be at least as strong as a ‘Hundra’, which is three ranks above her current level.”

Even in the Uppsala Kingdom, the men generally took up the arms. So when a woman was only as strong as an average man, she was obliged to fulfil her role as a woman instead.

Their reasoning was that any other man could take her place, but only a woman could give birth, so she ought to fulfil that duty.

But precious few women were born with a talent for martial arts so great that it would be “a waste to force them into the role of a woman”.

Only women, who outperformed an average man by far, were allowed to become “warriors”, because their martial art skills were more profitable to the country or tribe than motherhood.

The female warriors of the Uppsala Kingdom literally had to be mannish women and more mannish than your average guy, at that.

“I see...”

Zenjirou was convinced by that explanation.

It was not hard to imagine how much Princess Freya yearned for the title for a “warrior”, seeing as she was not content with getting stereotyped.

So it was most understandable that she could not rein in her excitement for putting on a banquet with the prey she had finished herself, a privilege that was usually only given to warriors.

Zenjirou sat down on a trimmed tree stump and looked around.

The banquet resembled the outdoor camping event from his middle school days, but most of the participants here were the soldiers that had guarded him up till now.

Because this event was held in appreciation for the hard work of the soldiers, only a handful of nobility from rear vassals of the Guzzle Family had been invited in addition to Nilda Guzzle, the nominal caretaker of this annex building.

Everyone was busy preparing for the coming marriage ceremony, so it would nothing but trouble, if Royalty were to throw a big party here.

Thanks to that, Zenjirou did not have to deal with troublesome conversations. Something he was very glad about.

“I cordially thank you for inviting me today, Master Zenjirou.”

While he was making himself comfortable on the stump, a little girl approached him: Nilda Guzzle.

With her large black eyes beaming out on him, Nilda took hold of her skirt and did a curtsy.

“Well, it is not my party, but Princess Freya’s, though. The dish comes from a Meat Dragon she killed herself, too. I hope it suits your taste.”

“Yes, she was kind enough to share some with me earlier. It is really delicious.”

The common tinge of flattery was absent in her bright smile, when she answered like that.

The skewer of smoked meat seasoned with spices and salt was actually a rather plain dish, but she was eating it with relish.

“Princess Freya sure is courageous for finishing off a wild Meat Dragon with a spear. I have seen a wild dragon once, when I was still living in the village, but I cannot even imagine going up against one. My legs would give in just from standing in front of it.”

Nilda shivered with fright, whereupon Zenjirou smiled vaguely.

“You lived in a village?”

“Yes. I was born and raised there by my mother. My father Marquis Guzzle found me, when I was nine, and acknowledged me as someone from the Guzzle Family.”

“I see...”

In other words, the feudal lord had laid hands on a female subject, making an illegitimate child without intending to.

That sounded like a difficult upbringing, if it was really true, but with that said, her expression was not tainted with sadness in the least.

(Maybe she was born with a carefree nature? Or did she have really kind people around her in both households?)

Completely unaware of his thoughts, Nilda kept on talking with an amiable bright smile.

"So I do have taken care of domestic Meat Dragons or Hulking Dragons before, but docile dragons are still plenty scary.

To think that she stood up against a wild dragon. I really respect that."

Her big eyes gleamed with respect, just like she had said.

At some point, the girl had all forgotten about her nervousness and reservation, talking to him most affable. Zenjirou gave her a wry smile and carefully picked his words to caution her.

"Yes, Princess Freya certainly is formidable. But you know, Nilda, it would be better, if you refrained from speaking so openly, even if it is meant as praise.

A lot of people in High Society tend to be offended by it and sometimes it can even cause a dispute."

"Yes, Master Zenjirou. I will take it to heart from now on. Thank you very much for your advisement."

Nilda looked bashfully at the ground as a result of his warning, exactly the kind of frankness Zenjirou literally had cautioned her about a moment ago.

(At the very least, there's no doubt that she isn't a natural-born noble.)

He came to that conclusion, when he looked at her ever-changing expressions.

On a closer look, Nilda appeared a bit awkward in her behaviour and choice of words.

That was surely the result of "deliberately putting her mind on" acting like nobility, just like Zenjirou did it.

(It does worry me. She's a bit too unmindful and friendly. I mean, she IS nobility after all.)

At the beginning, Nilda had been nervous and reserved, but she had opened up at the open-air banquet in no time, just like a little puppy to its owner.

(If that's all part of their scheme, I tip my hat to the Guzzle Family, but Ines said they aren't really like that.)

The reason Zenjirou was thinking about the Guzzle Family along these lines was because the girl named Nilda quickly made a favourable impression on him.

The girl did not harbour fear or wariness towards Royalty or Nobility, even though she had been adopted into a noble family at a young age. It suggested the assumption that the Guzzle Family had not treated her badly.

Zenjirou was actually quite fond of people with such rich expressions. Props to them, if that was what they were after.

"Master Zenjirou, is the Royal Capital really that big? I have heard that the Royal Palace is supposed to be quite a sight to be see, but I cannot quite envision it. Would you be so kind to tell me about it?"

"Well, I rarely ever leave the Royal or Inner Palace, so my opinion is pretty biased, but I believe it is quite beautiful.

The buildings are uniformly built with white stones and look sturdy, but also stylish. The gardens are affectionally maintained as well, growing beautiful flowers and trees, and the fountains or ponds have water as clear as crystal. A few ponds even have fishes in them to look at.

Its surface sparkles goldfish yellow, because of the golden fishes and clear water. Definitely well worth seeing."

"Oh, wow. Fantastic! I would like to go there and see it!"

The Royal and Inner Palace were practically "his home" now, so he was happy, but also a bit bashful to see the outright admiration in her eyes.

"You have never gone to the Capital before? The Guzzle Family does have a residence there, no?"

"My family seems to have always attached more importance to its own territory, so

only a bare minimum of personnel stays in the Capital. And I am still a minor, so I seldom if ever leave this place.

“Ah, but I am pretty sure that I will be brought to the Capital once I turn fifteen!”

“I see. Unfortunately, I cannot show you around town in my position, but what I can do is show you around the palace, when you come by.”

It was extremely rare that Zenjirou made such a promise of his own accord. He seemed to have let his guard down a bit around the open-hearted Nilda.

“Yes, I am looking forward to it.”

Nilda answered him with a bright smile.

As the host, Princess Freya had been busy sharing the food with everyone, but she more or less finished exchanging pleasantries and had some time for herself now.

“You did well, Princess Freya. Everyone seems to be enjoying themselves.”

Zenjirou stood up and greeted Princess Freya, who approached him with a satisfied smile.

“Thank you, Your Majesty Zenjirou. May I sit down next to you?”

The silver-haired princess took a silver goblet with fruit wine from the tray waiting maid Ines offered her, had a taste of it and asked him that with a dazzling smile.

Zenjirou could not help but show his bewilderment.

He was currently sitting on nothing extravagant like a bench, but a mere “stump of a tree”. Needless to say, her question was not referring to another seat next to him, but whether she was allowed to sit down on the same stump.

It was quite the bold proposal, but it would not make a good impression, if he were to refuse her.

With a smile, Zenjirou took off the vest he had been wearing and covered the stump with it.

“Yes, of course, Princess Freya. Please have a seat.”

“Thank you very much, Your Majesty.”

Although the stump was relatively big, with two people on it, they were sitting close enough to feel each other’s body warmth.

The hem of her dress was even touching his foot. Zenjirou might as well put his arm around her waist to make this proximity more comfortable.

“.....”

“.....”

A man and a woman were sitting together on a single stump of a tree in a garden at night.

The flame of the fire bathed the silver hair and pale-white skin of Princess Freya in a reddish light.

Zenjirou was entranced by her without meaning to. The silver-haired princess cocked her head a bit as she smiled at him.

“Allow me to express my gratitude once more, Your Majesty. A dream of mine has come true thanks to you.”

Her illuminated smile was not the kind of superficial smile nobility always used, but one that revealed her honest feelings.

“I am glad to be of help. The customs of your homeland do not apply here on the South Continent, so I believe you may act as you see fit.”

“So Skathi told you. It is a bit embarrassing to have your childhood dream exposed. But I was really happy.

Hunting a dragon with my own hands and hosting a feast for the soldiers somehow makes me feel like an hero of old.”

On the South Continent, dragons were nothing but livestock, but on the North Continent, they were the stuff of legends. Creatures you only found, when you ventured deep into the uninhabited mountains.

It definitely was somewhat heroic to slay one of these with your own hands and prepare a feast with it.

Zenjirou neither had the guts, nor the skills to do something like that, so he did not even think about trying it, but he did understand her admiration for that kind of thing.

"I admire your courage and zest for action. That strong heart of yours surely has enabled you to make the long voyage between our countries."

"Fufu. According to my brother back home, I am merely reckless and restless. I was just trying my best in my own way, though.

I practiced the bow as well as the spear and learned how to camp outside. For sea travel, I even memorized the sailor's knot and the handling of a corded ladder. On top of that, I learned the necessary magic for long-distance sea-travels such as 'Water Manipulation' and 'Drinking Water Treatment'.

None of these skills will help me get married in the future. On the contrary, they will be a burden."

"But you are now here, precisely because of these efforts. In my opinion, every knowledge and skill you gain will be an asset for life."

Zenjirou did utter these words as a praise, but at the same time, they came from the heart.

The Carpa Kingdom was even more set on enforcing the gender roles than the Uppsala Kingdom, the home country of Princess Freya, but Zenjirou was married to Queen Aura, an exception to the exception, so he barely had adopted the common sense of this country.

According to his moral values, learning seafaring or even a little bit of martial arts was a legit virtue.

To begin with, he would have never fallen for Aura, if he had deemed martial arts or vigour unnecessary for a woman.

Princess Freya must have noticed that his words were more than just simple fair-seeming.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. Shameful as it may be, I do like running around in the wildness with my spear or crossing the vast ocean in a boat.

I am well aware that I am going against all common sense, so I do not blame anyone for frowning upon my behaviour or reprimanding me for it.

But nothing could make me happier, when someone actually accepts what I like to do with a passion."

"Haha, it makes me feel embarrassed, when you are this happy about it. But I did mean what I said earlier"

The man from a different world and the girl from the North Continent had all forgotten about the fact that they were sitting so close to each other that their feet were touching, and were happily engulfed in their chit-chat.

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It was obvious that the open-air banquet was coming to an end. The meat and vegetables were all eaten up, the empty barrels of alcohol were multiplying and the fire was starting to burn out. Anyone could tell that the party was nearing its end.

The earlier loud laughter and tone-deaf songs died down and only some hushed conversations remained. At this point in time,

DONG, DONG.

The sound of a large bell suddenly resonated through the dark night.

"Ines?"

Zenjirou immediately stood up from the stump and consulted the waiting maid standing at attention behind him, but Ines shook her head with a composed look.

"It seems to be coming from the main building, but I do not know why. However, I believe it is not an emergency, seeing as Lady Nilda is not reacting to it."

His gaze automatically shifted to Nilda and she certainly did not seem surprised by it, nor did look the least bit worried or frightened.

When Nilda noticed his gaze, she stood up with a jerk and came trotting over to him.

"My apologies, Master Zenjirou. I did forget to inform you about this. The bell just know only signalizes that a guest has arrived at the main gate."

You there, please go over to the main building for more information."

"Yes, understood."

Upon her order, one of the soldiers on watch went off.

"A guest this late at night?"

Zenjirou could not help but cock his head puzzled.

Right now, nobility from all across the country were coming together in the March of Guzzle for the marriage ceremony, so a guest itself was nothing out of the ordinary. But it was strange that one would arrive at such an hour. It goes without saying that travelling at night was quite dangerous in various ways.

They were not pressed for time, since the marriage ceremony was not going to be held tomorrow or anything, so they would normally not push their luck and rather spent one more night in a suitable place, arriving here first thing in the morning instead.

While Zenjirou was mulling over this, the soldier came back from the main building.

Even amidst this darkness, you could tell from afar that the soldier was rushing over as fast as he could. He then reported with a loud voice.

“Reporting in! Just now, the delegation from the ‘Navarre Kingdom’ has arrived!”

“The Navarre Kingdom?”

As the name sounded familiar to him, Zenjirou recalled the necessary information in his head.

The Navarre Kingdom was a middle power situated in the middle west of the South Continent. It bordered on the Carpa Kingdom with a steep mountain range in-between them as a buffer. And that very border area happened to be the March of Guzzle.

In other words, they were practically neighbours, if not for that mountain.

It seemed somewhat odd that a neighbouring country would send a delegation to the marriage ceremony of local nobility, but it was not really unusual for a feudal state.

The feudal lords in the borderlands were given a certain level of freedom in regards to independent contact with bordering countries.

As soon as he remembered that, Zenjirou could get his head around their arrival.

“Oh, I see. If they are coming from the Navarre Kingdom, it makes sense that they travelled through the night to arrive by today.”

The mountain range between the March of Guzzle and the Navarre Kingdom was quite dangerous in terms of terrain and dragons living there.

It certainly was true that the risk of travelling at night was lower than staying an additional night in such a dangerous place.

Because he remembered these circumstances, Zenjirou accepted the situation and the soldier, still out of breath, continued his report.

“Moreover, the delegation of the Navarre Kingdom is headed by General Martín Nadal!”

The reaction to that name was dramatic.

Before, the garden had become so silent you could have heard a water drop hit the ground, but in the next moment, amazed outcries echoed through the night.

“Th- That General Martín!?”

“No way! Who’s protecting their country then!?”

“It shows how serious they take the liaison between the Guzzle Family and General Puyol.”

Be it the soldiers Zenjirou had brought along from the Royal Capital, the soldiers from the March of Guzzle or even the rear vassals of the Guzzle Family, no one could keep their surprise and excitement in check, saying whatever they wanted.

The only exceptions were Princess Freya and Skathi, since they had never heard of the name of General Martín and just cocked their heads puzzled, and waiting maid Ines, who never broke her calm mask.

Looking around, Zenjirou relied on Ines for information.

“Ines, who is General Martín?”

“Yes. Martín Nadal is the most prominent general in the Navarre Kingdom.

He emerged from the previous war as the hero with a lot of achievements and it is said that most of the credit for surviving the war belongs to him, considering the Navarre Kingdom is by no means a major power.”

She must have expected his question. The middle-aged waiting maid calmly answered him in a business-like tone.

Zenjirou widened his eyes surprised, when the evaluation turned out even better than he had expected.

“In short, he has the same standing as General Puyol in our country?”

His question was met with immediate approval from the middle-aged maid.

“Indeed. General Martín is on par with General Puyol.”

“Hm?”

Something about her phrasing bothered Zenjirou. She had not used the phrasing “is said to be on par”, nor the phrasing “is considered to be on par”.

He was bewildered that she had called him his literal equal with all certainty. Ines amplified her explanation as though clearing up his confusion.

“More precisely, he is the very person that inflicted the wounds that General Puyol has on his cheek and forehead.”

“...I see.”

The guest had an unbelievably meaningful connection to the groom, so Zenjirou bid adieu to his wishful thinking that this marriage ceremony would end without trouble.

# Chapter 2

## The Marriage Ceremony

General Martín Nadal was a man in the prime of his life, a little bit over forty.

Also known as the Guardian Deity of the Navarre Kingdom, this man looked exactly like what you would expect from his title.

One-hundred and ninety centimetre tall and over hundred kilogram heavy.

He was one head shorter than the almost two metre tall General Puyol, but surpassed him in body width. Needless to say, that did not mean that he was fat.

His body was a stronghold of trained muscles to the point that it did not show his age of over forty years at all.

Despite his massive boar-like build, he moved around smoothly like a feline predator.

General Martín was sitting on a chair in one room of the building the Guzzle Family had allocated to him, and cracked a wry smile.

“Oh man, have got to give the Carpa Kingdom credit. Or should I say, the Guzzle Family, in this case? Either way, they are not to be underestimated.”

When the hero of their country uttered this almost fearfully, the young knight standing at attention behind him gave a nervous response.

“Could you explain what you mean by that, General Martín? The Carpa Kingdom always had more fighting power than our country.”

“Hm, you don’t understand? Look at this chair and desk. The chair doesn’t even bulge under my weight and is quite comfortable. The desk has the right height, too.

And they immediately brought me to this room, when I arrived, without having to

wait."

Being told that much, the young knight came to understand what the general was implying as well.

"...In other words, word got out somewhere that you will be attending this marriage ceremony as our representative?"

The general was one-hundred and ninety centimetre tall and weighted over a hundred kilogram, so a normal chair and desk would obviously not meet his needs. The chair would squeak alarmingly, if he sat down rashly, or it could turn into a catastrophe, when he sat down in a chair with armrests, because his firm bottom did not fit in.

But nothing of the sort happened with the chair he currently sat in. It was a simple wooden chair without decorations, but easily supported the hundred kilogram of the general and was a perfect fit for him in terms of height and width.

"Well, I'm not sure about an information leak. I think they just anticipated it. After all, my connection to General Puyol is rather well-known."

Saying this, General Martín unconsciously put his right hand on his breastbone and scratched his old wound over the clothes.

General Puyol had given him that wound in the previous war.

Not really the type to dwell on things, General Martín still could not help but pay attention to General Puyol, though.

"Did he arrange this? Maybe not. This is the land of his bride. Not even General Puyol has that much to say here, yet."

The only other logical explanation is that the Guzzle Family arranged it. But I can't see the Marquis being so considerate. Does he have a smart adviser...?"

The giant general lost himself deeply in thought, but was brought back to reality by the gaze of the young knight in the corner of the eye.

"Hmm, what's up?"

The young knight had been staring at one corner of the table for a while now.

His gaze went to a small rectangle box. It contained cinnamon sugar hardened in stick form.

It was an unnecessary provision for General Martín, since he hated sweets, but the young knight had a weak spot for it despite his virile appearance, so he could not ignore it.

“Ah, no, it is nothing.”

The young knight deliberately averted his gaze from it with a cough, whereupon General Martín smiled wryly.

“You sure love sweets.”

“...Something wrong with that?”

Turning a bit red in the face from shame, the young knight puckered his lips.

“Not per se. But I do hate them.”

“I do like them.”

“Yes and that’s the problem. Why do you think these are left here, when I hate them, but you like them?”

“...Oh?”

For a moment, the young knight was at a loss for words, when the general pointed it out.

Seeing the knight turn pale in the face, General Martín smiled sympathetic and called the things as they were.

“That’s right. Not many men like sweet things like that. I can’t be dead certain, but I say it’s quite likely these are for you, Cristiano Pinto.”

The hero of the previous war called the young knight by his name.

"It goes without saying for a person with a standing like you, General, but why would they be aware of an obscure guy like myself?"

"Oh, come on, Cris. Don't be so hard on yourself. Any person with a spark of intelligence would obviously keep the name Cristiano Pinto in mind."

General Martín was by no means lying, when he said that.

Not even twenty years old yet, Cristiano was still young, but he had already risen to the envious position of a Knight Captain affiliated to the general. One reason for that was his ancestry: He was the oldest son of the famous Pinto Family, which had inherited the royal blood quite strongly. But the bigger reason was his own martial skills.

The general was not so shallow as to pick him based on the right pedigree alone. To begin with, General Martín had worked his way up from nothing, so he valued actions over words and thought little of lineage.

With these views, General Martín had pinned his hopes on Cristiano Pinto as the "next protector of the country".

Nevertheless, it was a fact that it needed a really perceptive person to take notice of him from a different country at this point of time.

"A large territory does not make a major power, neither does a large population. Maintaining that large territory and large population by employing the right personnel is what makes a nation a major power.

Never forget that."

"Sir, yes, Sir."

The general and his protégée from the Navarre Kingdom called the caution against major powers, the Carpa Kingdom in particular, to mind once again.

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Around the same time, the people from the Guzzle Family were extremely busy with preparing for the marriage ceremony and greeting the arriving guests in the main building.

That was nothing out of the ordinary by itself. The marriage between influential nobles was such a big event after all.

“Lady Lucinda, the adjustments to your wedding dress have been finished. Please try it on now.”

“I understand. Wait for me in the room next door. I will come over as soon as I am done here.”

“Lady Lucinda, Master Zenjirou and his group have had dinner and Miss Nilda reported that there were no problems.”

“Good. Tell Nilda to drop by my room before going to bed. I want to hear the report from herself, just to be sure.”

“Lady Lucinda, we have ushered the delegation from the Navarre Kingdom to their rooms. They have not expressed any displeasure for now.”

“Glad to hear that. Of course we cannot privilege a certain group, but it would become an international affair, if something were to happen with them, so please be extra careful, when dealing with them.”

The only abnormality here was the fact that Lucinda Guzzle, the bride-to-be herself, was managing the versatile planning in its entirety.

She had always been in charge of the territory, because the Marquis was generally working in the capital, but her duties did not even change on this special occasion.

Lucinda Guzzle was still unmarried at twenty-six, even though the etiquette in the Carpa Kingdom considered it to be already too late, when you had not married before twenty. Normally that would mean that she was unattractive or quick-tempered, but in actual fact, that was not the case with her.

Her facial features were admittedly plain, because of an inconspicuous small nose and

mouth, but did not prevent her to be called a “spruce beauty” by some and there were no problems with her personality, either, seeing as the servants of the March trusted in her.

If anything, her zeal for running the business of the March despite being a woman, was somewhat contradicting the common sense of the Carpa Kingdom, but Lucinda always emphasised that she was just “filling in for her father until her little brother was old enough to take over”.

She was not the kind of unorthodox woman, who cleverly wielded the highest authority in the country despite being a woman such as Queen Aura or unashamedly risked her life on sea travel like Princess Freya.

To begin with, she only missed her timing to get married, because her nubile years happened to overlap with the previous war. In place of her father, who was out on the battlefield, Lucinda had to take care of the territory and her little brother, leaving her no time to think about marriage. These reasons had been completely beyond her control, so she was different from the usual “marriage failures”.

Once she had listened to all the reports from the servants, Lucinda turned to the table and looked through the documents with a cool-headedness that made you question whether she really was a noble daughter on the brink of marriage.

“As expected, the Navarre Kingdom sent General Martín as their representative. I did not foresee that Knight Captain Cris would accompany him, though.

I hope the sugar snacks were prepared in time?”

“Yes, we put them in the room before letting them in.”

“Well done. Thanks.”

Everything had been done on behalf of her. The right furniture was prepared for General Martín, because Lucinda had anticipated him as the messenger from the Navarre Kingdom, and the sugar snacks were served at such short notice, because she had acquired the information that Knight Captain Cris liked sweets.

As a proxy for her father working in the capital, but de facto leader of the March,

Lucinda had paid special attention to the neighbouring Navarre Kingdom across the mountain and gathered all kind of information.

For the Carpa Kingdom as a whole, the Navarre Kingdom was nothing but a small middle power not worth their attention, but the neighbouring country posed enough of a threat to the independent March of Guzzle.

Hence Lucinda was as cautious about the Navarre Kingdom as General Martín was about the Carpa Kingdom.

"I have heard that General Martín is a lot more perceptive than his militant appearance lets on. He must have noticed the meaning behind the special furniture and snacks.

I just hope the feint will work."

Lucinda mumbled and put the dragon bone quill in her right hand back into its stand.

In fact, General Martín had figured out that the matching furniture for him and the favourite snack for Knight Captain Cris had been a message from Lucinda.

A message that read: "I know all this about your activities."

Lucinda was going to get married, which meant that the March of Guzzle would lose her as its representative.

Of course she had immediately started with the preparations for her succession as soon as her marriage was set in stone.

Her little brother Xavier, the next head of the family, and the mayordomo rear vassal were taught the necessary work and were introduced to as many spokesmen of their subjects as possible, passing on the information network she had build up till today.

But these were nothing but rough-and-ready measures in the end. Nothing could be done about it, though, since her marriage came on an extremely short notice, even by higher nobility's standards.

Once Lucinda was gone, the March would more or less be thrown into turmoil, so she had wanted to send a warning to the neighbouring country not to take advantage of that turmoil.

"At any rate, I really come to appreciate the consideration from Master Zenjirou in this situation. I have to properly express my gratitude later on."

The consideration was referring to his following words: "I am looking forward to seeing the newlywed couple on the day of the marriage ceremony."

In other words, he had declared that they did not need to entertain him until the day of the marriage ceremony. Thanks to that, the Guzzle Family could give Royalty, originally the most high-maintenance guest, a short shrift by just assigning a bare minimum of servants to the annex building.

If not for his consideration, Zenjirou would have come to greet the Marquis in advance and congratulated the bride as soon as possible as Royalty. In that case, the Guzzle Family would have been overwhelmed with obligations by now.

Lucinda felt a shiver ran down her spine in light of that scary imagination. In the meantime, the door was opened and closed with a clatter.

"Excuse me, Sister. I have just returned from doing my rounds in the city."

These words were uttered by the next head of the Guzzle Family: Xavier Guzzle.

Just like he had claimed, he had been patrolling the city and was still wearing his leather armour and longsword at this late hour.

"Well done, Xavier. Has the city been quiet?"

Lucinda thanked her little brother for his efforts with a warm smile and signalized the servant next to her to pour him some cold tea.

The siblings then sat down across each other on the couches.

"Yes, it has. Nothing worth mentioning has taken place. The people are all celebrating your wedding from the bottom of their hearts."

Sitting on the couch, Xavier reported proudly while throwing out his chest.

He had lost his mother had at an early age, so Lucinda was more like a mother, who raised him, than an older sister to him.

No one was more happy about her marriage, delayed by unfortunate circumstances, than him.

Lucinda giggled embarrassed to herself, when she saw the joy in the eyes of her little brother as though it was his own wedding.

"Is that so. I am glad to hear that. So no one is picking any fights, because they are drunk?"

Maybe in order to hide her embarrassment, she quickly talked business.

Xavier looked a bit troubled and averted his eyes, when she pointed that out.

"Actually, a lot of that is happening. Should I have banned the alcohol instead?"

"No. It would be tasteless to celebrate the marriage without alcohol. Just continue to take those into custody, who cause a ruckus."

But please keep in mind to not let anyone without permission near the residence until the ceremony is over. We cannot risk a strife with another noble family."

"Yes, I understand, Sister."

The older sister gave instructions and the little brother accepted them as a matter of course. Considering that he was going to be the next family head, that hierarchy was not quite favourable.

"...I was anxious about leaving home after my sudden marriage, but it actually might be better that way. If I were to stay here any longer, I think I would cause more problems than I can solve."

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

"No, just talking to myself."

Lucinda brushed it off like that while heaving a sigh at heart.

If she were to remain in the March while Xavier succeeded the position of the family head, it would undoubtedly disrupt the balance of power.

At the very least, the rear vassals and influential citizens would rather trust Lucinda than Xavier in domestic affairs, and above all else, Xavier himself was too fixated on his elder sister.

In the worst case, the March might even split into two opposing camps, when she remained here unmarried and could not get along with any future sister-in-law Xavier might take in.

So Lucinda was of the opinion that her marriage was already worth it, even if avoiding that future was the only good thing that came out of it.

While she was on these train of thoughts, she might as well give her little brother a final lecture.

"Xavier, I will marry General Puyol in a few days and leave the March afterwards."

"Of course. Congratulations on getting married, Sister!"

Lucinda gave her teary-eyes little brother a wry look.

"Thanks, dear. Anyway, this will be the last time I can give you an heartfelt piece of advice with only your wellbeing in mind, so please listen well."

After that prelude, she wiped her usual warm smile off her face and showed a stern expression.

"O- Okay."

Xavier instinctively sat up straight and rested his clenched fists on his lap. A saying claims that the child is the father of man and in accordance with that, Xavier fundamentally could not go against his elder sister, who had raised him in place of a mother.

"Once I am the wife of General Puyol, you may not blindly trust me like before anymore."

"S- Sister...?"

While the little brother was at a loss for words, the older sister overwhelmed him with further explanations.

"As soon as I marry him, I will have left the Guzzle Family and be a part of the Guillén Family. From then on, my first priority will be the Guillén Family. The Guzzle Family only comes in second.

I will belong to a different family and you do not blindly trust someone like that."

"B- But..."

Xavier was baffled, but Lucinda was only stating a fact.

Nobility valued their house, so it was only natural that they took the view that you had to put the family you married into above all and adopted their customs.

Needless to say, that opinion was more of an idealism, if anything, and hardly anyone put it into practice to such an extent.

In fact, the majority of people still considered themselves a member of their parental home at heart, even if they married into a new family.

The best example for that would be the little sister of General Puyol: Fatima Guillén. She really loved her older brother and valued him above all things, so it was hard to imagine that she would suddenly prioritize her new family over him, when she got married at some point.

However, that general rule did not apply to the woman called Lucinda Guzzle.

She had naturally accepted that she, as a noble daughter, would devote her everything to her new family henceforth, now that she had been asked for her hand in marriage.

The aforementioned idealism was embodied by her to an inhumane level.

"Are you saying you will become my political opponent from now on, Sister?"

Her little brother turned pale in the face, whereupon Lucinda realized that her explanation had been a bit lacking.

She deliberately softened her expression and cleared up the doubt of her brother with her usual kind voice.

"Not at all. I did not mean it in such a radical way. To begin with, our two families were never on such bad terms to call us enemies and my marriage will actually stabilize our relationship even further."

In reality, I doubt that I will ever be able to bring harm to the Guzzle Family or you, Xavier."

"I- I know, right!"

Crying in one moment, smiling in the next. Her little brother changed expressions at his own convenience, whereas the older sister smiled back at him troubled.

"Marriage is a kind of contract for nobility. From now on, I have to bear the profit for the Guillén Family in mind, but as long as it does not harm the Guillén Family, I will obviously be allowed to bear a profit for the Guzzle Family in mind as well."

Forget all about your parental home once you marry.

That would be way too disadvantageous for the family providing the bride. Hence the bride was allowed to draw a profit for her parental home as long as it did not affect her new family adversely.

Xavier listened to her explanation with a meek look.

"Considering the current standings of the Guillén and Guzzle Family in the Carpa Kingdom, I dare to say that it will be quite unlikely that the Guillén Family will cause harm to the Guzzle Family."

But the future is not set in stone. If one day, the interests of both families were to completely contrast each other, then I will bring harm to the Guzzle Family in order to

make a profit for the Guillén Family.

I just want you to bear that possibility in mind, okay?"

"...Okay, I understand, Sister."

Looking meek, the little brother answered with a nod to the warning of his older sister before she was going to marry into a different family.

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A few days later.

The day of the ceremony arrived without any incidents.

They were holding the marriage ceremony in the banquet hall in the main building of the Guzzle residence.

It was not as pompous as the "Room of the Dragon King", where Zenjirou and Aura had held their wedding, but it was almost as big.

The large hall was filled with numerous round tables and the invited nobles sat on chairs in a circle around them.

Needless to say, Zenjirou was one of them. With him at the same table sat his partner Princess Freya and her trusted retainer Skathi as well as his bodyguard, the Knight Natalio.

Ines stood at attention behind him in her usual maid clothes.

A marriage ceremony in the Carpa Kingdom was not all that starchy, so the guests casually enjoyed some chitchat with some drinks until the bridal couple made their entrance.

"So this is a marriage ceremony on the South Continent. I see that it is not all that different from ours."

Lowering the silver goblet with fruit juice from her mouth, Princess Freya started talking to Zenjirou next to her with a lovely smile playing on her lips.

"Oh, is that so. I'm not all that familiar with the culture on the South Continent, either, but I've heard that they used to sit on a soft carpet during the ceremony in the past.

It might be the influence of the North Continent that all the guests are sitting on chairs at tables now."

"That is quite plausible. I would like to thank my ancestors for it then."

Zenjirou realized what she was implying, so he casually asked with a playful tone.

"Oh my, you are uncomfortable with sitting on a carpet?"

"Yes, I am afraid so."

Princess Freya looked down a bit embarrassed, when she was exposed.

Although the culture of sitting down on a carpet was a thing of the past on the South Continent, it had not entirely vanished yet. Some traditional events still required you to sit cross-legged on top of a carpet and some tradition-conscious noble houses were refraining from setting up chairs and tables in the dining room to this day, setting and eating the dishes from atop the carpet instead.

Due to that, the nobility in the Carpa Kingdom was more or less used to sitting on a carpet, but Princess Freya was nobility hailing from the North Continent, so she could not come to like that custom.

On the other hand, Zenjirou was pretty much okay with the custom, too. Modern Japan was certainly seeing more and more appearances of chairs and tables, but there were still plenty occasions to sit cross-legged on the ground like in a room with Tatami mats.

Thanks to that, Zenjirou did not suffer as much during traditional events without chairs and tables.

(Won't she have more troubles like that, when she actually becomes my concubine?)

Zenjirou was worried like that, but the only way to find out would be to directly ask her.

But if he were to tell her that he was worried about her life as a concubine, he would practically admit to accepting her as a concubine.

At the present time, everything was pointing to Princess Freya becoming his concubine. It was probably already impossible for him to avert that development by his own effort, but even then, there was no reason for him to speed up that process, either.

While Zenjirou pondered about that, the stroke of a large gong rang out and echoed through the hall.

“Oh.”

“Looks like it is time.”

The gong attracted the attention from all the chit-chatting guests and today's centrepiece, the bridal couple made their appearance.

“...”

The first to show up was the groom, Puyol Guillén.

Wearing his full dress uniform, the giant general imposingly strode over the red carpet while the decorative bronze sword hung from his waist.

It was typically of him to wear the military uniform instead of the traditional attire of the Carpa Kingdom at his wedding ceremony. As a matter of fact, an uniform suited him the best anyway.

Close to two metre tall and a hundred kilogram heavy, the steeled soldier wore the extravagant military uniform decorated with gold threads like a second skin. He personified the common image of a “General of the Army” par for par.

“...”

After him followed a woman in her late twenties wearing a white long dress.

Zenjirou was seeing her for the first time, but there was no question about it that she was the bride, Lucinda Guzzle.

According to the proper etiquette, she followed a step behind by the side of her preceding groom.

Aura and Zenjirou had walked alongside one another, when they had gotten married as the Queen and Prince Consort, but that had been an extremely rare exception to the exception.

Normally, the bride followed diagonally behind the groom at a marriage ceremony in the Carpa Kingdom.

The groom was attracting the most attention, but Zenjirou was looking at the bride, since he was seeing her for the first time.

(So she is Lucinda. Not the prettiest out there, but still beautiful.)

She looked smaller, because she was trailing behind the almost two metre tall General Puyol, but she actually had an average height and build.

Her black hair was full and glamorous, her black eyes beamed with kindness and her skin had the common brown tinge of a person from the Carpa Kingdom. Even clad in the snow-white wedding dress, she still looked somewhat plain, but her features were well-defined enough to get an immediate positive answer, when asking someone whether she was a beauty or not.

In the meantime, the bridal couple advanced on the red carpet and went up to the podium.



There an elder priest was awaiting them. He was going to perform the marriage ceremony.

Since the main religion on the South Continent, the faith in spirits, was not really institutionalized, the priest were only responsible for a hand of ceremonial occasions such as coming-of-age, marriage or burial.

The elderly priest faced the bridal couple standing in front of him and opened his mouth covered by a white beard.

"Under the protection of the Spirits, this man and woman will enter into the holy bond of marriage today. May the Spirits smile to their future."

From time immemorial, the brave man has always protected the frail woman behind him, whereas the compassionate woman has always offered the foolish man consolation in her arms. The Spirits are sure to respond to their mutual empathy."

Because the Spirit Faith on the South Continent had neither been systemized, nor institutionalized, the ritual words at these occasions were generally determined by the priest on duty.

Zenjirou curiously listened to the self-penned speech of the priest, but he suddenly felt uncomfortable, so he looked around from the corner of his eye while keeping his gaze focussed on the bridal couple.

(Hmm? I sense a gaze on me? From whom?)

He could not see him all that clearly, because he was just looking out of the corner of his eye, but he did see a sturdy silhouette of a soldier.

(The foreign guests should be seated over there... So that's General Martín from the Navarre Kingdom?)

In reality, Zenjirou was not looking at General Martín, but at Knight Captain Cris sitting next to him, but he could not discern it that well, because he was still looking ahead.

Having said this, Knight Captain Cris was slender and only one hundred and eighty centimetre tall, whereas General Martín was practically a giant with his almost two metre height and hundred kilogram weight.

Their auras were too different to begin with.

Zenjirou was puzzled as to why he was the target of his attention instead of the bridal couple in the middle of the ceremony, but it was actually not all that strange.

He was the Prince Consort of the major power known as the Carpa Kingdom. In short, a genuine Royalty with a bloodline magic.

So a foreign authority was obviously going to pay him more attention than the bridal couple.

In the meantime, the ceremony was moving along.

On the South Continent, the marriage ceremonies followed all kind of procedures like the speech from the priest or the marriage vows from the couple, but this ceremony was a bit different at the end.

“The couple will now exchange the weddings rings.”

The unfamiliar ritual of exchanging wedding rings prompted the guests to murmur agitated and Zenjirou to widen his eyes in surprise.

In that very moment, General Puyol faced Zenjirou and gave him an appreciative look while smirking for a second.

Zenjirou understood with that.

(Oh, right. Aura did tell me that my marriage rings had started the custom of exchanging wedding rings in this country, too.

So General Puyol also picked up on it, eh.)

The earlier look must have expressed his gratitude to Zenjirou for introducing them the custom of exchanging wedding rings.

Under the watchful eyes of the guests, the bridal couple took the pair rings from the priest and put them on the finger of their partner.

Zenjirou did not go as far as telling them that the wedding ring belonged to the ring finger of the left hand. It just happened naturally, since that finger provided the least inconveniences for wearing a ring at all times.

The same reason probably applied to its simple gold design without any gems.

As a soldier, General Puyol would by no means profit from wearing a cumbersome jewellery on his finger. The plain ring without any gem had probably been a compromise on his part.

It might be a bit too plain for a woman, though. Even in this world, most of the women had a thing for beautiful large gems.

A thought suddenly crossed Zenjirou's mind.

(Maybe I should tell them about 'engagement rings', too? Women are sure to love a brilliant ring, but the men will have to bear the costs. I guess the wedding rings are enough for now.)

Apparently Lucinda was different from the majority of women as she narrowed her eyes happily, when General Puyol put the unadorned golden ring on her hand.

"Thank you, My Husband."

For some reason, the soft voice of the bride resonated through the whole hall.



In the Carpa Kingdom, the marriage ceremony of higher nobility or wealthy people was followed by a ritual called the "Rite of Unveiling".

As its name implied, the rite dealt with the bridal couple showing themselves in front of those, who could not attend the ceremony itself, and announcing their marriage. The invited guests of the ceremony were asked to abstain from attending the "Rite of

Unveiling”.

On the plaza in front of the residence of the feudal lord, the newlyweds put themselves on display for the citizens of the March in their wedding attire. In the meantime, the guests of the ceremony were regaled with food and drinks in a different room.

The host of that gathering was the family of the bride, namely the Guzzle Family, but the people from the Guillén Family were also functioning as co-organizers.

“Master Zenjirou, I cannot thank you enough for going out of your way to attend the marriage of my daughter today.”

Marquis Guzzle himself approached Zenjirou first of all with these words.

He was as tall as Zenjirou, but a multiple of him widthwise. His neck was fatter than his face wide, his shoulders were sloping from excess muscle mass and his arms were round like a log. He should be over forty by now, but even an amateur like Zenjirou could tell that his body was still that of an active soldier.

A bit overwhelmed at heart, Zenjirou showed nothing of the sort on the outside and responded with a smile.

“No need to thank me, Marquis. The Guzzle Family as well as the Guillén Family are important pillars of our country. It goes without saying that I would attend the union of your families as a representative for Queen Aura.”

Zenjirou emphasized the fact that he was only a representative for Queen Aura, whereat Marquis Guzzle answered with an honest smile, which was quite rare coming from a high-ranking nobility.

“You honour me with your words. Of course I am grateful to Sir Puyol for taking my daughter after she missed out on marriage for too long due to my shortcomings, but I am even more grateful to Her Majesty Aura for allowing the normally unthinkable marriage between the Guillén and Guzzle Family. I, Miguel Guzzle, shall never forget this favour!”

“You have earned this trust by devoting your everything to the country so far.

Her Majesty sincerely hopes that you will not cease your endeavours.”

"Of course. I would not dream of doing so."

Zenjirou reminded him that he admittedly had gotten a connection to the heartland now, but should not use this occasion to start meddling with the power struggle there, so the elderly marquis lowered his head deeply.

As a matter of fact, Queen Aura was really trusting Marquis Guzzle.

Of course the Guzzle Family was no different from the other feudal lords, so they put their own territory first and the kingdom second, but they were also known for their fidelity and loyalty.

Even in the previous war, the army of the marquis had obediently followed the orders of the country, which had been a great help.

Setting Marquis Ralah, pretty much a relative to Aura, aside, it would be no exaggeration to say that she trusted Marquis Guzzle the most of all nobility.

"Anyway, today is a day to be celebrated, so let this be enough of formalities. Let me introduce you:

This is Princess Freya Uppsala, the crown princess of the Uppsala Kingdom. She is accompanying me as my partner, because Her Majesty Aura could not leave the Capital.

Princess Freya, this is Marquis Guzzle. He is usually working in the Capital, so maybe you have seen him before?"

Upon these words, the princess from the North Continent took one step forward as she had politely waited behind Zenjirou so far.

"My name is Freya Uppsala. Congratulations on your daughter Lucinda getting married!"

She grasped the hem of her simple blue skirt and did a curtsey.

The etiquette in the Uppsala Kingdom was slightly different from the one in the Carpa Kingdom, but her gesture was so gracious that it would be rude to point it out now.

"Thank you very much, Princess Freya. As you can see, we live in the middle of

nowhere, but please make yourself at home.”

Marquis Guzzle responded politely, but much to his regret, Zenjirou was unable to tell whether his respect was attributed to her current title as a “princess from the North Continent” or her future title as a “concubine of the Prince Consort of the Carpa Kingdom”.

“I appreciate the hospitality, Marquis Guzzle. We are being cared for quite courteously in the annex building. Am I right, Your Majesty Zenjirou?”

“Yes, that is right.”

She probably had asked for his opinion with a smile on purpose, because she wanted to spell out for the others that she was staying under the same roof as him.

“Heh, I am glad to hear that. You have done well, Nilda.”

Whether he was aware of her intentions or not, Marquis Guzzle showed a bright smile and called out to his beloved daughter standing behind him.

“Yes, Father. Thank you, Princess Freya.”

The little girl lowered her head with her big eyes shining. She did look a bit tense from nervousness, but more than that, she gave off an affectionate aura like a tamed little animal.

When he was looking back at his daughter, Marquis Guzzle was showing a soft expression as well. Or at the very least, Zenjirou could not catch any sight of some intrigue or ulterior motive in it.

(Even at the ceremony, he openly let Nilda sit with the rest of the family. That means he really isn’t trying to hide her? It’s getting more and more puzzling.)

The girl, who was apparently unknown to Royalty, was being treated as a normal daughter at an official event in the March. And not only that, she was even assigned the role to look after Royalty.

Zenjirou somehow started to get the feeling that the whole thing was just a plain old misunderstanding.

To begin with, the girl called Nilda and the man called Marquis Guzzle were way too sincere to actually consider this as some kind of scheme.

“By the way, I have heard that Miss Nilda has a different mother than Sir Xavier and Lady Lucinda?”

Just in case, Zenjirou probed them like this, whereat the elderly feudal lord scratched his greying head and honestly affirmed it, even if a bit reluctant.

“Yes, that is correct. Xavier and Lucinda as well as my other two sons, who died in the previous war, are the children of my legal wife.

On the other hand, Nilda is the product of my juvenility... Well, I was not at an age to call it that anymore, though. Anyway, she is the child I made with a female subject of mine.”

Saying so, Marquis Guzzle patted the head of his daughter standing next to him.

“Fufu...”

Having her head patted, the little girl narrowed her eyes happily like a puppy.

A person from Modern Japan would surely get offended, when its own birth was called a “product of juvenility”, even if coming from a parent, but Nilda showed no sign of concern.

Maybe it meant that the parentage was just too important in this world? Or maybe father and daughter were getting along so well that she would not get disheartened just from that kind of crude phrasing.

Zenjirou would like to say it was the latter, seeing her display of affection.

“As Princess Freya said before, Miss Nilda is taking good care of us. She is always so bright and cheerful. I often catch myself copying her. So far, I had a great time here, because of that. So let me express my gratitude once more: Thank you, Miss Nilda.”

“Oh no, your words are wasted on me, Master Zenjirou.”

At any rate, Zenjirou concluded that he should not dig any deeper into the issue without instructions from Aura, so he dropped the subject at a suitable point.

Even if Zenjirou and Princess Freya were the most important guests, Marquis Guzzle could not afford to spend all his time on a single group as the father of the bride.

After the marquis left, Zenjirou was unsurprisingly flocked by the other guests to exchange pleasantries.

The etiquette of the Carpa Kingdom dictated that it was bad manners for one of lower status to call out to someone of higher status, but marriage or burial ceremonies were an exception to that rule.

Apparently, all the guests were considered to be of equal rank in the sense that they all had the same motive, either congratulating the bridal couple at a marriage ceremony or mourning the deceased at a burial ceremony.

Due to that, Zenjirou had no time to enjoy the actual banquet and was busy dealing with nobility one after another.

"It is nice to make your acquaintance, Master Zenjirou. Her Majesty Aura was so generously to bestow me with the title of a viscount. My name is Primo Guillén. The groom Puyol happens to be my nephew."

"Master Zenjirou, thank you very much for going out of your way to attend the marriage ceremony of my brother today."

With these words, a man in his early fifties and a tall girl lowered their heads at the same time.

Just like he had introduced himself, the man was the uncle of General Puyol: Primo Guillén; The little girl was the little sister of General Puyol: Fatima Guillén.

"Oh, thank you for the polite introduction, Sir Primo. I am Zenjirou, the husband of Her Majesty Aura. And I am glad to see you are doing well, Miss Fatima."

Primo Guillén was a tall man with the blood of the Guillén Family running through his veins.

He definitely was not as tall as the two metre tall Puyol, but there was still an obvious gap between him and Fatima, so he must be at least one hundred and eighty-five

centimetre tall.

Nevertheless, there was no overwhelming aura coming from him like General Puyol did, when he was just standing there.

Although this might sound a bit rude, his height was his only redeeming feature.

In fact, Fatima was drawing far more attention in her moss-green dress as she stood self-confidently next to him.

"Yes, Master Zenjiou. As his little sister, it gives me a piece of mind that my brother has tied the knot."

But if you looked carefully, you could tell that her smile as she said that was somewhat forced.

(Well, she practically got a brother complex, so it's no wonder she can't sincerely be happy about his marriage.)

And even more so, when his bride was the twenty-six years old Lucinda. Since the South Continent labelled women older than twenty as a lost case for marriage, she was practically the epitome of an old woman well past her prime.

Without exaggerating it, Fatima firmly believed her brother to be the "best man on the South Continent", so it was no surprise that she was dissatisfied with such a late bloomer being his brother's legal wife.

Despite that, she was making an effort to not let it show in her attitude and words, because she realized how important the marriage with Lucinda and thereby the connection to the Guzzle Family was.

Having said this, Fatima would never even think of opposing her older brother to begin with, no matter how much displeasure she harboured about his decision.

"Well then, Master Zenjirou, if you will excuse me."

"It was a pleasure to have met you, Master Zenjirou."

When Primo Guillén and Fatima Guillén left, the next guest took their place.

"It has been a long time, Master Zenjirou. I am glad we worked out that incident in Valentia together."

A man wearing the traditional attire of the Carpa Kingdom like a second skin, greeted Zenjirou with an affable smile.

"Oh, Sir Raffaelo. You definitely played a big role in it."

Zenjirou responded to the greeting of the successor to the Márguez Family, Raffaelo Márguez, with a smile as well.

At the same time, he looked at the "fiancée of Raffaelo", who was standing behind him at an angle.

Keen as he was, Raffaelo noticed the gaze and showed a broad grin.

"Allow me to introduce her, Master Zenjirou. She is my betrothed: Keyshia from the Massana Family."

With these words, he put his arm around her waist and ushered her in front of Zenjirou.

Zenjirou was a bit captivated by the woman brought before his eyes.

Her glamorous long black hair was beautifully pinned up and her red dress revealed her bare shoulders and neck. Everyone knew what a faithful husband he was, himself included, but even then, Zenjirou could not help but be smitten by her beauty and charm.

She was an eye-catching extraordinary beauty with well-proportioned long arms and legs, smiling with conviction and confidence.

Keyshia had already been a sight for sore eyes in her maid clothes, but Zenjirou was in raptures about her enchanting dress.

"It is my first time seeing you wear anything else than maid clothes, Keyshia, but I

must say, you are truly beautiful. Your charm was already standing out in the Inner Palace, but seeing you all dressed up like this makes me speechless."

Praised by the man, who had been her master not long ago, the bewitching woman widened her eyes affected and puckered her lips a bit petulant.

"Oh my, thank you very much, Master Zenjirou. But what a surprise. I never thought I would see the day, where you compliment my appearance, because I thought for sure that you only have eyes for Her Majesty Aura."

"I am human, too. When I see something beautiful, I will appreciate it."

Zenjirou gave the well acquainted former maid of the Inner Palace a wry smile with a shrug of his shoulders.

That reaction of his prompted the nearby nobility from the Carpa Kingdom, who had been listening in so far, to be taken aback.

It happened very seldom that Zenjirou talked that casually with a woman. He was always "playing it safe" at official night banquets.

Zenjirou himself was no aware of it, but his reaction increased the value of being a "waiting maid of the Inner Palace".

The waiting maids of the Inner Palace proved to be a connection to the Prince Consort.

While the nearby nobility renewed their understanding like that, Raffaelo Márquez already had a former waiting maid as his betrothed and said with a smooth smile.

"Well then, Master Zenjirou, we will excuse ourselves for today."

"Okay. Take good care of Keyshia, Sir Raffaelo."

He could have kept the conversation going for as long as he wanted by using his fiancée, but Raffaelo parted from Zenjirou with these words.

If anything, his time with Zenjirou was quite short, compared to other nobility.

In the past, Raffaelo had suggested his father Manuel Márquez to keep their distance from the “monstrous” Zenjirou for now, and he was faithfully abiding by his own words.

Be it the bride’s Guzzle Family, the groom’s Guillén Family or the Márquez Family, they were all important enough that Royalty could not afford to neglect making allowances for them, but since they were nobility of the same country, Zenjirou somewhat knew how to deal with them and even if he were to make a mistake, things could be smoothed over later on.

But right now, he was facing the guests of another country on whom these advantages did not work.

Namely: The representative of the Navarre Kingdom, General Martín and his attendant Knight Cristiano Pinto.

When the obviously trained foreigners approached Zenjirou and Princess Freya, their bodyguards Knight Natalio and Skathi put themselves on the alert behind them. Only waiting maid Ines kept cool and collected.

“Nice to make your acquaintance, Your Majesty Zenjirou.

My name is Martín Nadal, a general in the army of the Navarre Kingdom. I am extremely grateful to be given the chance to meet you today.

And this is Cristiano, a young knight in our army.”

“I am Knight Captain Cristiano, the eldest son of Marquis Pinto. It is an honour to meet you, Your Majesty Zenjirou.”

The general in his forties and the young knight probably still in his teens, bowed their heads to Zenjirou in unison.

By the way, General Martín and Knight Captain Cris were an exception in the sense that they were attending the ceremony without a female partner.

If possible, a marriage ceremony was usually attended with a partner, but there was no iron law that forbid to attend it alone.

They practically had passed over the mountain on a footslog, so no women had been capable of accompanying them.

Under such circumstances, a man was not really frowned upon for attending alone.

“Much obliged, General Martín. I am Zenjirou, the husband of Her Majesty Aura, the Queen of the Carpa Kingdom. Your reputation precedes you as even I have heard of it.

And this is Princess Freya Uppsala, the crown princess of the Uppsala Kingdom on the North Continent.”

“My name is Freya. I am from the North Continent, so I am afraid that I have not heard of your achievements, but it is nevertheless an honour to make your acquaintance, General.”

Following the introduction from Zenjirou, Princess Freya also introduced herself and lowered her head a bit.

Zenjirou withdrew his left hand he had put around Princess Freya’s waist, and faced the two men standing in front of him.



(So he's General Martín, the Hero of the Navarre Kingdom. A giant of a man. And his presence is even bigger.)

Wearing a smile, Zenjirou managed to not let his anxiety show on his face, but at heart, he instinctively was afraid of the man standing in front of him.

The seasoned warrior in front of him was close to two metre tall and almost twice as heavy as him, so it already deserved praise that Zenjirou faced him without backing off.

As Royalty, Zenjirou was technically wearing a decorative sword at his waist, whereas the foreign general was unarmed, but there was no way that such a thing would compensate for the difference in their strengths.

"Greetings to you, Princess Freya. It is an honour to make your acquaintance."

"Pleased to meet you, Princess Freya."

General Martín and Knight Captain Cris returned the greeting to Princess Freya.

"But I must say, I am surprised to see you here today, General Martín. I assume your relation to General Puyol is the reason that a famous general attends a marriage ceremony of a neighbouring country?"

In reality, Zenjirou had not even heard of his name before, but he did not mention that, of course.

Nevertheless, he did have a point there.

It was not all that strange that they would send a messenger to the marriage ceremony of a feudal lord family from a neighbouring country, but it was an exception for sure that an important general was chosen for that role.

For anyone, who knew that General Puyol and General Martín had a feud with each other from the previous war, it was only natural to assume that General Martín came here especially for General Puyol.

All the nearby nobility curiously pricked up their ears, when Zenjirou asked that.

With all the attention on him, the famous general shrugged his shoulders a bit and

affirmed it with a brazen smile.

"Well, to be honest, that is definitely the biggest reason.

Nonetheless, the Carpa Kingdom is an important neighbour to the Navarre Kingdom, so if not for me, they would surely have send someone of equal status."

To be more precise: General Martín had been concerned about the character of General Puyol.

It was well-known after all that General Puyol was an ambitious man.

That capable and ambitious general was going to bond with the feudal family on their border in form of marriage, so the Navarre Kingdom obviously could not sit back and do nothing.

He was enough of a "threat" to send in their important general to check on him.

Zenjirou pretended not to have noticed that implied nuance in the answer from General Martín and responded with a smile.

"Yes, neighbours should get along well. I do hope we both do not forget that fact and continue to work towards it."

"My sentiments exactly, Your Majesty Zenjirou."

Two authorities from bordering countries were having a typical two-faced conversation.

Local affairs aside, Zenjirou was not yet used to dealing with foreign countries appropriately, so he could not help but play it safe.

Their conversation naturally avoided diving into political waters and shifted towards personal preferences instead.

"This reminds me, we are neighbours, but is our food culture actually different? I did hear that it is not unusual for a culture to change beyond the border."

"Well, I am not all that familiar with your cuisine, but as far as I can tell, it is not all that different. If I had to name something, it would be the fruit wine. The fruit wine of the

Carpa Kingdom generally tends to be sweeter than ours.

Thanks to that, Knight Captain Cris is treating himself to some on a rare occasion. Am I right, Cris?"

"S- Sir, you..."

Suddenly addressed, the young knight was at a loss for words for a moment and glared at the respectable general of his own country.

A lot of men with a sweet tooth were very self-conscious about it and apparently Knight Captain Cris was one of them.

Having said this, he had somewhat come to terms with it, seeing as he was not forcing himself to drink dry wine at an official event for appearance's sake.

"You cannot help to like what you like after all. I do know that it is childish of me, but I let them prepare my food without certain herbs, too."

Zenjirou tried to help him out by revealing a peculiarity of his own, but Knight Captain Cris was not man enough to honestly accept his good intentions.

"...Why, thank you."

Although he lowered his head, he was giving Zenjirou a resentful glare. To him, it must have seemed like General Martín and Zenjirou were pairing up to make fun of his fondness for sweets.

Zenjirou read in the expression of the young knight that it would be unwise to pursue this topic any further, so he changed the subject somewhat forcefully.

"What about this then, General Martín? Does a drink like this suit your taste? This alcohol is the recent product of the Capital. It is quite strong, albeit light in taste. General Puyol seems to have taken a liking to it."

With these words, Zenjirou recommended General Martín a silver goblet with the "distilled liquor" from the Capital.

"Oho! If it has your approval, I will have to try it... Hmm, it certainly is strong enough to burn your throat, but it is a bit too tasteless to my liking."

“I thought so. You are not the first to say this. I guess we have to think about improving the taste.”

“That sounds promising. I would like to try it once you have done so.”

“Please share it with your country then. I do hope it will become a local speciality of our country after all.”

Knight Captain Cris regained his composure while Zenjirou and General Martín were chatting like that, so he asked Zenjirou dubious.

“Your Majesty seems to think like a merchant. Maybe you come from such a family?”

General Martín frowned in light of the phrasing from the young knight captain. It was well-known that Zenjirou was not true-born royalty, but calling him a merchant could be considered an insult.

However, Zenjirou was not offended by it.

“Well, not quite correct, but not entirely wrong, either, I guess.”

He affirmed it to some extent without getting angry.

Originally, Zenjirou had been working in the sales department, so it was not all that wrong to call him a merchant.

“This reminds me, I have heard that Your Majesty has achieved a major victory against dragons the other day.”

General Martín had no way of divining what Zenjirou was thinking, so he touched on a flattering topic as though smoothing over the problematic statement of his subordinate about royalty from a different country. Unfortunately for him, he was barking up the wrong tree in the case of Zenjirou with that idea.

“Oh, I was just overseeing things there. To begin with, I am completely unsuited for battle. I was stretching myself to the limit not to get in the way. That alone made me break out in a cold sweat already, so I never want to have anything to do with it again.”

“Err... Is that so.”

His answer obviously bewildered General Martín, seeing as he stumbled on his words.

“.....”

And Knight Captain Cris next to him could not quite conceal his contempt and disdain for him in his expression.

But he could not really be blamed for it, because Zenjirou was too much of an abnormality in this world for stating so brazenly that “he could not fight and was weary of it”.

A noble man in his prime that could not fight belonged to the minority and was usually ashamed of belonging to that minority.

Judging by the moral values of this world, it only looked like Zenjirou was putting up a defiant front.

“Then Your Majesty is not training on a daily basis?”

Knight Captain Cris was obviously looking at his hand, when he asked that, so Zenjirou showed him his hands with a wry smile.

“Yes, as you can see. And it would be an useless effort to start now. I resigned myself to it.”

As if emphasizing his words, the palms of his hands had no calluses and were as lean as a child’s or woman’s by the standards of this world.

If he had done baseball or kendo in university, he might have fooled them to some extent, but unfortunately, he had belonged to the soccer club. His road of life had not been the kind, where he got any calluses.

“It is never in vain to practice martial arts, even if only a little. Your Majesty should set aside any biases and just try it out.”

The words from Knight Captain Cris sounded like he was saying it in the interest of Zenjirou, but the contempt for him was still present in his eyes and voice.

Zenjirou was not so dim-witted that he would fail to notice that, but he also knew that it would become a pain in the ass, if he were to comment on it now.

“Haha, you are right. I will keep it in mind for next time.”

After a moment of deliberation, Zenjirou conquered his feelings and decided to ignore the vicious remark from Knight Captain Cris.

“...I am glad I could make you understand.”

“.....”

As Knight Captain Cris did not abandon his contemptuous attitude, General Martín thanked Zenjirou for his lenience by casting down his eyes.

After the bridal couple completed the “Rite of Unveiling”, it was common practice that they returned to the banquet hall and participated in the party belatedly.

Unlike the marriage ceremony, the banquet was a sociable party, so the guests were allowed to speak directly with the bridal pair.

In a way, it was the main event for those, who had attended the marriage ceremony for diplomatic reasons.

Under the pretext of congratulating the newlyweds, they could approach them regardless of social standing after all.

But right now, not a single person was approaching the groom General Puyol, even though the bridal couple had finally made an appearance here.

The hall had fallen dead silent and everyone was just awaiting the issue without moving an inch.

Creasing his face into a smile, General Puyol was looking at General Martín, who was showing him the same kind of smile.

The awed guests in the hall were just supporting actors for the confrontation between the two great heroes of the previous war.

“Long time no see, General Martín. I’m glad you haven’t kicked the bucket yet.”

Shortening the distance between them at a leisurely pace, General Puyol spoke first.

It remained unclear whether he scratched the scar over his eyebrow with his left hand on purpose or unconsciously.

“Of course I’m alive and kicking, General Puyol. After all, I haven’t seen you in a while. There’s no way I would get wounded unless I’m fighting you, right?”

Replying like that, General Martín placed his right hand on broad his breast bone quite purposefully.

There was a scar under his clothes. The shallow, but long cut across his breast bone had been inflicted by General Puyol.

Both of them were veterans that had survived the previous great war and the countless scars on their bodies told its tale.

But most of these wounds were inflicted by projectiles like arrows or stones and the few wounds from melee weapons were all suffered through chaotic scuffles.

The only wounds they had inflicted on each other directly were the scars on the face of General Puyol or the scar across the breast bone of General Martín.

On the battlefield, one was always having a brush with death, no matter how brave or heroic they were. In that sense, neither General Puyol, nor General Martín were anything special.

But considering that they still could thrust death into your face, even if you were to keep yourself in perfect shape, sharpen your mind without the slightest neglect and ward off any ill fortune, you could not avoid calling both of them “special” after all.

“.....”

“.....”

General Puyol was almost two metre tall and over a hundred kilogram heavy, whereas General Martín was one-hundred and ninety centimetre tall and over a hundred kilogram heavy.

Accordingly, General Puyol surpassed him by ten centimetre in height, but General Martín outweighed him breadthwise.

While they glared at each other like a sabre-tooth tiger and a grizzly, the air in the hall was at an heavy standstill.

“Looks like you didn’t neglect training. It must be tough finding free time for training in your position as a general. I must say, I’m impressed, General Puyol.”

“Yeah, thanks. I dare to say I’ve grown stronger since then. I’m also glad to see that you still have been training, General Martín.”

“I had to work my way up after all. Strength has a bearing on your leadership skills, so I can’t afford to slack off. Yet the best I could do this year was maintaining my current form.”

“Oho, if that is true, you might prove to be an equal opponent now.”

“Pfft, cut the flattering. Back then, we were evenly matched, but right now, you are definitely stronger. That doesn’t mean you will win, though, if we have a bout.”

“Oho...”

“Heh...”

Neither of the two heroes was usually the chatty type, but the more words they exchange, the broader their smile got. At the same time, the tension and will to combat rose between them proportional to that smile, though.

Were they going to go at it right here?

Maybe they both had been joking in the beginning, but accidentally reached the point of no return?

Everyone was holding their breath with these worries, but the woman standing next to the groom, namely the bride, released them from that sorrow.

"My Husband, I do understand that you have a lot to catch up on with your old friend, but for how long are you going to neglect your new wife on this special day? I would like you to introduce me to him."

Lucinda Guzzle, or rather Lucinda Guillén now, said this with a soft smile and tugged at the sleeve of her husband reminding.

Her expression was the quintessence of affability and you could not find a single trace of tension or fear anywhere on her.

It seemed like she was "cutting into the conversation of the two men thoughtlessly, because she was sulking about her husband not paying any attention to her", but reality was different.

On the contrary, she had given thought to it more than anyone and concluded that it would be dangerous to let them continue like this, so she went in to stop them by pretending to be oblivious to the situation.

Dangerous as it may be, it was not like General Puyol and General Martín would actually start a fight here.

But Lucinda feared that if they were to continue to speak at daggers drawn, the others would get the impression that "the two of them really wanted a fight", which would add unnecessary tension to the relation between the two countries.

"Although I do know that you two have just been joking around, a woman cannot help but be scared by it. Please apply yourself to me now, My Husband."

Emphasizing the fact that they were joking around, Lucinda looked up into the eyes of her now husband from the side.

"...Hmm, you are right. My bad. Soldiers are oblivious to the delicate mind of women by nature, but I do admit that we have gone a bit too far. Forgive me, Lucinda.

General Martín, let me introduce her. As of today, this is my wife Lucinda.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, General Martín. I am the eldest daughter of the Guzzle Family and as of now, the wife to Puyol Guillén, the current head of the Guillén Family. My name is Lucinda.

I do have heard of your achievements, General. It is a great honour to get acquainted with you.”

A gentle voice and calm pronunciation coupled with a modest smile.

Without resorting to force, the newlywed wife pacified the atmosphere through mere words. General Martín changed his attitude as well in light of her smile.

“What a lovely bride. My name is Martín Nadal, a general from the Navarre Kingdom.

It seems you are not just lucky on the battlefield, Sir Puyol. To think you actually managed to win such a fine wife.”

“Yes, I am really glad that I stayed single until today.”

“You flatter me.”

Peace set in between the bridal pair and the general from the neighbouring country, so the rest of the hall resumed their happy chit-chatting as well.

# Intermission 1

## The Queen in the Capital

Unlike before, Zenjirou had started to take on some jobs as Royalty in recent times.

Now that he was away from the Capital, it meant that the work he had been doing was left undone. Some of these jobs could temporarily be delayed, seeing as he was only going to be away for a month, but that was not the case for all of them, so these other jobs had to be done by someone else.

For example: Entertaining Prince Francesco and Princess Bona from the Twin Kingdom of Sharrows and Jilbell. With Zenjirou gone, Queen Aura had no choice but to take on that role upon herself.

“Oh, it’s been a while, Your Majesty Aura. How is Prince Carlos doing?”

Prince Francesco made himself comfortable on the couch as though he was at home and spoke to the red-haired Queen sitting across from him.

The casual tone from the blonde prince did not agitate Queen Aura as she just nodded with a smile.

“Thanks to you, he is doing well. I owe you a great deal, Prince Francesco. And I am even putting Princess Bona through a lot of trouble, so that we can meet like this.”

She replied with a calm tone.

“If that’s how you feel, please turn rhetoric into action later on.”

“That I shall.”

Princess Bona was a chaperone for Prince Francesco. Because of that, Prince Francesco was generally not able to attend an official gathering without her.

In order to get her out of the picture, Aura had requested a peculiar magic tool from Princess Bona as payment for their residence here.

Her request had been an “outdoor candlestick”. As the name implied, it was just an elaborate illuminant, but it actually required the combination of three different spells.

Namely the “Flame” magic as the source of light, the “Wind Wall” magic as a protection against outside influences as well as the “Water Manipulation” magic as an amplifier through reflections.

Each spell was relatively low class and would not take all that long to imbue into a magic tool. But the problem was that only one marble had been arranged for all three required spells.

The main “Flame” magic could be imbued within one day, if the marble was used as its medium, but the other two spells had to be imbued the normal way.

So no matter how hard Princess Bona might try, she would take at least one month for each bestowal. Adding the time required to craft the candlestick itself, she would need around three to four months to complete the tool.

Consequently, Princess Bona was going to be busy for a long time.

Needless to say, she was not going to spent the whole day working, even if she did allocate a lot of time to it, but she was going to be occupied for at least half a day every day until the tool was done.

During that time, Prince Francesco could act on own his behalf.

“This reminds me, His Majesty Zenjirou is attending the wedding by now, isn’t he? I must say I sure was surprised that you acknowledged the northern princess as his partner. You are as bold as ever, Your Majesty Aura.”

The blonde prince grinned broadly, whereas the red-haired queen kept her composed smile.

“Love is a matter of the heart. No matter how much influence you may wield, it is impossible to capture the heart completely through it.”

“Wise words, Your Majesty.”

Aura insisted that Princess Freya had only become his partner due to personal feelings, whereupon Prince Francesco nodded his assent exaggeratedly a few times.

Seeing as the reaction from the blonde prince was as unreadable as ever, Queen Aura obfuscated her smile and asked him.

“What about you, though? I am sure you know what it symbolizes to bring another woman besides your wife to a wedding ceremony. Is there nothing you want to tell me, considering our countries have a secret agreement in regards to the concubines of my husband?”

“Ahaha, oh please! No one actually expected that agreement to be kept.”

On the other hand, the reply from Prince Francesco was so blunt it made you question it instead.

Nevertheless, he had been telling the whole truth.

The secret agreement was not about “restricting concubines for Zenjirou”, but rather recited “what had to be done, when Zenjirou had a child with a concubine”.

“Then I can assume that Princess Bona is another chess piece in the same game?”

The reason Aura threw him such a provoking question was that Princess Freya had changed the situation drastically.

For the nobility of the Carpa Kingdom it was already only a matter of time before Princess Freya would become a concubine.

And since a second concubine would not make much of a difference anyway then, they had resumed their own offensive to push a concubine onto Zenjirou.

With the “secret contract” at work, Aura needed to know the intention of the Sharrow Royal Family, when they were going to increase the number of concubines for Zenjirou.

Having said this, it was almost impossible to have a reasonable discussion on the level of “sounding each other out” with Prince Francesco.

“Hmm, at the very least, the Sharrow Family won’t intervene if Bona gets intimate with His Majesty Zenjirou. Well, in my opinion, something will only happen between them when His Majesty visits the Twin Kingdom.”

“...”

The prince revealed the scheme of his own country with a nonchalant expression, whereat even Queen Aura had to fall silent for a moment.

It sounded too plausible to brush it off as a joke or bluff, but neither could she take it at face value.

In the end, she had no choice but to proceed cautiously.

“Oh, so you are saying the Sharrow Family would receive my husband with open arms to the Capital of the Twin Kingdom?”

“Why, yes, of course! Except maybe His Majesty himself, everyone is always ‘ready and waiting’ to welcome him.”

“...That sounds more like they are ready to catch or capture him, rather than welcome him.”

“Haha, you’re as perceptive as ever.”

Prince Francesco practically admitted it with his answer, whereupon Aura wrinkled her brow without breaking her poker face.

(I feel like I am fighting against an amorphous monster.)

The blonde prince showed not the slightest reaction to the deliberately shown displeasure of the Queen, and just grinned stupidly.

“I shall tell my husband to come back right away, if he ever feels to be in danger.”

“Nothing wrong with that. Oh, can I ask His Majesty Zenjirou to deliver a letter, when he visits the Twin Kingdom? I would like to write my parents and siblings back home

once in a while.”

Prince Francesco had the “Burning Pair Parchment” to get into contact with them, but it was a scarce magic tool. He could not use it for a personal message.

The request from Prince Francesco prompted Aura to blink once in surprise.

“Hmm? Does that mean you are staying here? I thought for sure you two would take the chance to return home together with my husband.”

Aura suspected that Prince Francesco had come to the Carpa Kingdom to check upon the bloodline magic disposition of Prince Carlos Zenkichi and let them know about his special ability to use two different bloodline magic.

Princess Bona on the other hand was probably sent here to serve as a honey trap for Zenjirou.

The former one had already achieved his goal and the latter one would have the best chances to achieve hers, when they returned home together with Zenjirou.

But Prince Francesco dismissed these conjectures with a shake of the head.

“As if. I actually like it better here, because there’s too much nagging back home.”

“Princess Bona does it here, too, though?”

“She is the only one here. There are a lot more at home, who keep nagging at me.

But I want to give my family a status report or rather show them a sign of life from me. Hence a letter. Is that too much to ask for?”

“.....”

Somehow or other, Aura discerned that Prince Francesco was telling the truth behind his nonchalant tone, so she narrowed his eyes and cleared up a misunderstanding he had made.

“Yes. That is exactly why I suggested you return together with my husband. You see, my husband will only visit the Twin Kingdom once he has learned the ‘Teleport’ magic.

The spell allows you to go back and forth between our Royal Palaces within one day in an extreme case.

I would send you there with my 'Teleport' magic and my husband would send you back from there with his 'Teleport' magic. Needless to say, it will cost you."

"Oh, I see."

Prince Francesco clapped his hands enlightened.

Just like she had said, they could establish a kind of finite warp gate between the Capitals of the Carpa Kingdom and the Twin Kingdom, when Zenjirou learned 'Teleport' and used it to go to the Twin Kingdom.

Considering the travel was going to be instantaneous and safe, Prince Francesco and Princess Bona had no reason to not go back home temporarily.

"If that is the case, I will gladly take you up on the offer. Ah, and I want you to do the same for Bona on a different day, too. Do you take gold coins as a payment?"

Prince Francesco asked with a beaming face, whereat Queen Aura replied with a sober voice.

"A magic tool would be more to my liking. I shall provide you with the gem for the medium, so I would like you to create a magic tool with 'Teleport'."

"....."

That request surprised even Prince Francesco.

Rendered speechless for a moment, he then showed a bright smile.

"That definitely sounds like a worthwhile task, but I think the price is a bit too expensive for applying 'Teleport' four times. How about this: I pay you in gold coins for my request, but make two magic tools with 'Teleport' in addition, from which I get one in compensation for my efforts."

The “Teleport” magic was the pivotal element of the Carpa Royal Family. So the Twin Kingdom had approached them numerous times to turn that spell into a magic tool, but the previous rulers of the Carpa Kingdom had never allowed this.

As Aura was proposing to break that taboo now, Prince Francesco leaned forward with a big grin, but Queen Aura just shook her head ungracious.

“No, just one. And even that one has to be a ‘disposable’ one with only a single use. If that is impossible, I will not force you.

Gold coins will just be fine as payment in that case.”

Whether she was just bargaining or never actually expected it to be possible, Aura outright rejected him with a steadfast tone.

“Hmm... Well... I would really like to get my hands on ‘Teleport’, though. But then again...”

Prince Francesco crossed his arms, wrinkled his brow and mumbled to himself for a while.

Before long, he seemed to have reached a decision. The blonde prince clapped himself on the knees and spoke.

“Okay, I’ll give up on the ‘Teleport’ for myself. But I do want that gem. You still have plenty of them, right? I want three of them, including the one I will need for your ‘Teleport’ magic tool. How does that sound?”

“You are being a bit too greedy now. I would be willing to compromise on two. But you will need to tell me for what kind of magic tool you want to use the second gem in advance. Otherwise I cannot comply.”

Strictly speaking, her answer was only to be expected.

Right now, Prince Francesco was staying in the guesthouse of the Carpa Royal Palace. Aura obviously had to make sure he was not going to make a dangerous magic tool.

But it apparently was not that obvious to Prince Francesco, seeing as he kept staring at the ceiling for a while.

“What for, you ask? Hmm, do I really have to tell you?”

“You do.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm...”

His inner conflict continued for some while, but at some point, he seemed to have made a decision and faced Aura with a resolute expression.

“Fine. I will tell you in confidence. But keep it between you and me. Not even Royalty must know about it.”

“Okay. I shall not tell my husband about it.”

Aura nodded confirmatory, but Prince Francesco shook his head.

“No, not just him, but all ‘other Royalty’”

“All other Royalty?”

She cocked her head puzzled, but realized what he meant after a moment of pondering.

Except Aura and Zenjirou, the only other Royalty in the Carpa Kingdom was the infant Carlos Zenkichi. He surely did not mean to keep it a secret from a child, who could not even speak yet.

It was also unlikely he would remind her to not reveal it to Royalty of an unrelated country such as Princess Freya at this point in time.

So there was only one possibility remaining: Concealing it from the other involved Royalty from the Twin Kingdom.

“...You mean to keep it a secret from Princess Bona?”

Aura narrowed her eyes to slits and asked him with feigned ignorance, whereupon

Prince Francesco answered with a profound grin.

"Not just Bona. I also mean my father and grandfather back home. Especially them, actually. They snapped at me, when I tried to make that magic tool once before. Man, it was hell on earth."

Prince Francesco scratched his head with a carefree smile, but even Queen Aura of all people became somewhat anxious now.

But there was no backing down after coming this far.

"Very well. I will keep it between you and me. Not a single soul shall learn of it from me. So tell me, Prince Francesco, what exactly are you trying to make?"

"Well, a magic tool imbued with 'Bestowal Magic'."

While he answered like that, his eyes beamed with rampant aspiration.



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“...”

After Prince Francesco had left the meeting room, Queen Aura slouched on the couch and heaved a sigh.

“What a troublemaker. Announcing an important matter just like that...”

A magic tool of the “Bestowal Magic”. If it was actually possible to make such a thing, it could shake the civilized world to the very foundations.

To be honest, his motivations were too uncertain, so she should not let him make one.

“But I really want a magic tool with ‘Teleport’. Without one, I would be too worried to let Zenjirou leave the country as it stands. The Twin Kingdom may not be as much of a worry, but I definitely cannot let him leave for the Uppsala Kingdom like this.”

This was what Aura have had in mind.

Princess Freya was supposed to go home to get permission for her marriage, after the issue with the Twin Kingdom was more or less resolved, and Aura wanted Zenjirou to accompany her on the “Yellow Leaves” on that occasion.

The biggest advantage of “Teleport” was that you could instantly go back and forth between places you had visited before.

Because of that, the Carpa Royalty had split up to visit allied and neutral countries before the great war, expanding their possible targets for the “Teleport” magic.

If Princess Freya did officially became a concubine for Zenjirou and they realized an intercontinental trade with the Uppsala Kingdom in the future, it would do no harm to have a person, who could go back and forth between their countries with “Teleport”.

The problem, however, was that the intercontinental sea travel was far from begin safe, even with a large sailing ship like the “Yellow Leaves” from Princess Freya.

Aura loved her husband, of course, but even more importantly, Zenjirou was the Prince

Consort, the only grown-up male in the Royal Family for now.

No matter how much of an advantage it was to be able to “Teleport” to the North Continent and back, it was not worth risking his life over it.

She needed something that could ensure his safety, namely the “Teleport” magic tool.

The “Teleport” spell was normally too difficult to cast in emergencies. This technically applied to all magic, because the magic would not activate without properly envisioning its effect. Hence it was impossible to invoke the magic in a life-threatening situation unless you had nerves of steel.

“And I do not see Zenjirou having these nerves.”

Aura truly loved her husband from the bottom of her heart, but she did not let that feeling cloud her judgment about his abilities.

Going by his nerves and personality, it was pretty much impossible to cast magic for him already, when someone next to him simply drew his sword.

Even if he were able to actually use “Teleport”, he would not be able to use it as a means of escape in an emergency.

As a consequence, Aura wanted a magic tool with the “Teleport” magic.

Depending on its setting, the magic tool could be used even when you were nervous or frightened as long as you still had a bit of reasoning left.

Zenjirou would be able to escape with it, when, for example, the ship capsized and sunk. Or when the delegation was dragged into some kind of conflict on land. Or even when the Uppsala Kingdom tried to detain him for some reason after he arrived there.

“I really want that magic tool, but for how much should I compromise? Prince Francesco even revealed that sensible information about a ‘Bestowal’ magic tool to me.

Knowing him, he surely is going to go ahead with it on his own anyway.

I guess they do not call him a genius creator of magic tools for nothing.”

On the other hand, they did not call him a carefree idiot for everything else for nothing, either.

“I need to put some thought into how much I can afford to yield to The Twin Kingdom or the Uppsala Kingdom and how I can draw the best profit from them for my country.”

Aura generally preferred to keep a balance between domestic and external policies.

Of course her own country always came first, but whenever possible, she chose not to get on the bad side of her negotiation partners just for a quick profit, nor did she treat them too favourable and let them get overbearing.

Her careful consideration was interrupted by the dry sound of a knock on the door.

“! Enter.”

“Excuse me, Your Majesty.”

Called in after the knock, a middle-aged man with a slender face entered the room. It was Secretary Fabio.

“Master Zenjirou has sent a Small Flying Dragon from the March of Guzzle. Here you are.”

Expressionless as ever, the secretary placed three wooden cylinder the size of a finger in front of Aura with these words.

Taking one of them, Aura pulled the small Dragonskin Parchment out of it and read what was written on it.

“Hmm... Mh? Nilda Guzzle? Fabio, do you know of anyone called ‘Nilda Guzzle’?”

The faithful secretary immediately answered the question of the Queen.

“No, I do not. Who is that supposed to be?”

“According to my husband, she is the ‘second daughter’ of Marquis Guzzle. Apparently she just came of age this year, so fifteen years old, and is the illegitimate child the Marquis had with a woman from his domain.”

Hearing the explanation from the Queen, the Secretary shifted his gaze to the ceiling and pondered for a moment, but shook his head resolutely in the end.

“Still does not ring a bell with me. Marquis Guzzle had four children. Three sons and one daughter. The first and second son both died in battle, so there is only his youngest son Sir Xavier and his daughter Lady Lucinda right now.”

“Are you sure?”

“Certainly. Or at the very least, they are the only ones listed on the ‘roll of names.’”

“I see... I am not questioning your memory, but check the ‘roll of names’ again, just in case.”

“Gladly.”

The so-called “roll of names” was a document from the Royal Family, where all the names of the local nobility were listed on.

Anyone on that list was nobility and vice versa.

In other words, the girl named Nilda Guzzle was “not officially acknowledged as nobility”, even when Marquis Guzzle actually claimed that she was his own daughter.

“It seems that very Nilda was entrusted with the duty to take care of my husband. It is unthinkable that a commoner would get to take care of Royalty, even if she may be his real daughter. In any other case, I would suspect a plot now, but...”

As though finishing her sentence, Secretary Fabio declared assertively.

“That is not possible. At the very least, its mastermind cannot be Marquis Guzzle. The best he could plot would be a pitfall.”

The Queen assented to his words with a wry smile.

"I see you are still not mincing your words, Fabio, But yes, I agree with you. It is hard to believe the Marquis can hatch a complicated plot.

In that case, we might as well just ask him about it. Fabio."

"Yes?"

"Dispatch an envoy to the residence of Marquis Guzzle here in the Capital. I assume most of them have returned to the March for the wedding, but someone must have remained to look after the place.

Make him come here. He might know something about it."

"Very well. I shall arrange it immediately."

The secretary bowed down to the order of the Queen so perfectly it seemed inhuman.

# Chapter 3

## For a Trivial Reason

A marriage ceremony between important nobles in the borderland simply did not end after the ceremony itself.

After all, influential nobles from far and wide, not to forget Royalty, had gathered here to celebrate it.

The road and inn accessibility in this world was nowhere good enough to cope with the situation, where the guests were told “thanks for coming” right after the ceremony and dispersed in small groups all at once.

Most people actually wanted to stay longer in order to use this opportunity for socializing.

And above all, it would be a grand event, when the groom General Puyol set out for the Capital with his wife Lucinda later on.

There was no way the other guests would leave ahead of them. The same naturally applied to Prince Consort Zenjirou as well.

Consequently, the capital of the March of Guzzle was bustling with all the wedding guests even now.

In his usual well-behaved way, Zenjirou spent the days in his allocated building without moving around much.

It certainly was inconvenient to be separated from his electrical appliances, but he had already went through that experience in Valentia.

Learning from his past mistakes, Zenjirou had brought along his portable music player as well as two portable game consoles this time, all of them charged in full.

Thanks to them, he had not been bored at night so far. Unfortunately he could only charge the devices in the Inner Palace, so he limited himself to use only one of them for one hour per day, but it was more than enough to pass the time in the otherwise uneventful nights.

The music player in particular played a decisive role.

Because Aura had recorded the chant for “Teleport” on it.

Listening to it on repeat, Zenjirou had set himself to learn the correct pronunciation of the “Teleport” chant for now.

“Ru Mavalaaiaia Hastaobraguopena... It’s no good.”

Zenjirou heaved a heavy sigh in the dimly lit room, which was only illuminated by the hand crank flashlight and the display light of the music player.

“Grr... I expected it, but it’s still difficult! The intonation alone raises the difficulty quite a bit.”

Putting the music player onto the desk, Zenjirou stretched himself on the simple chair he was sitting on, muttering with a loud voice.

Just like he had mentioned, the intonation for the “Teleport” chant in the magic language was already pretty difficult by itself. He had practiced it whenever he had time on the way here, but so far, he had not succeeded even once.

As things stood at the moment, Zenjirou was still miles away from fathoming “Teleport”.

“Will I really be able to use an awesome magic like ‘Teleport’ one day?”

Not quite complaining, nor exactly losing heart, Zenjirou muttered to himself while he turned off the music player and took a silver bell from the desk, ringing it.

It was met with an almost instant reaction.

“Yes, you called for me?”

With these words, a middle-aged woman neatly wearing maid clothes entered the room: Waiting Maid Ines.

The light from the flashlight was quite selective, so the room was pretty much wrapped in darkness except for the desk, but Ines showed no sign of missing her footing.

Because this world had no illumination tools whatsoever, its people had become a lot more accustomed to seeing in the night than Zenjirou. As one of them, Ines did not even feel inconvenienced by this level of darkness at which Zenjirou would not hesitate a second to turn on the lights.

And since it was dangerous to walk around with a light source such as an oil pan, people generally refrained from carrying one as long as they still could see more or less in the dark, so Zenjirou was practically an exception to the exception.

As his waiting maid came closer with her usual smooth steps, Zenjirou called out to her with a casual question.

“How’s Princess Freya doing?”

He could take this attitude, because he was all alone in the room with the well-acquainted waiting maid.

Ines, too, was used to that behaviour.

“Princess Freya is being shown around the main building by Miss Nilda.”

She answered in a matter-of-fact tone.

“Oh, I had heard they were getting along, but this well? I’m a bit surprised.”

“They are somewhat close in age and Miss Nilda has quite the sociable personality, after all. And Princess Freya does not seem to be put off by her attachment, either.”

Up to a certain age, Nilda had been raised in an uneventful farming village, so she listened with genuine respect to the unusual exploits of Princess Freya from the bottom of her heart.

Likewise, Princess Freya must be enjoying to be the target of admiration from a younger girl for a change.

“Glad to hear. Just having someone to talk to already fends off boredom.”

“You seem to have opened up to Princess Freya as well, Master Zenjirou.”

“A bit, yes.”

When Ines gave him a light smile, Zenjirou showed a wry smile to hide his embarrassment.

Although Zenjirou admitted that he found it difficult to deal with the openly affectionate Princess Freya, he could not help but be somewhat attracted to her, when she was smiling so innocently together with Nilda.

Standing up from the chair, Zenjirou took the flashlight from the desk and pointed it at his feet while talking to Ines.

“Well then, let’s go pick her up. It’s almost time for dinner. Ines, can you take me to the main building?”

“Certainly. Are you sure, though? I can go by myself, if it is just to call her back.”

“I can’t really do that. It would spread rumours that we don’t get along.”

She had been brought along as his partner for the marriage ceremony, so other people already had concluded that it was only a matter of time for her to become his concubine.

If it were to seem like they were not getting along well now, it could harm the country in the future.

“Besides, I want to stretch my legs.”

Perceptive as he was, Zenjirou realized the circumstances were moving towards an unfavourable outcome for him and yet, that knowledge did not prevent him from taking action in that very direction.



Around the same time, Princess Freya was walking down the dim hallway of the main building with Nilda.

Her bodyguard Skathi was following three steps behind them.

“Please watch your step, Princess Freya. Will you be fine?”

“Yes, I can see relatively well in the night and even participated in a couple of night manoeuvres. Thank you for your concern.”

Just like she had asserted, Princess Freya kept a firm walking pace.

By the standards of Modern Earth, the stony hallway was wrapped in a considerable darkness, but Princess Freya and Skathi were accustomed to seeing in the dark more than enough, whereas Nilda knew her family home inside out. Even if she could not see as well, she could move around from memory.

“Wow. I take it that you took training for it?”

“Instead of specially training for it, it would be more accurate to say that I naturally adopted to it. You see, huntig and sea or river travels do not necessarily end by nightfall, so you have no choice but to continue throughout the night. As a result, I came to be able to see at night.”

She mentioned it most carefree, but that method was anything but it. At the very least, it was not something a princess was supposed to do.

In fact, Skathi showed a wry smile behind them. As her bodyguard, she had been dragged into all of her hoydenish adventures.

“Milady, we are near a corner.”

“Yes, I can see it. Thank you, Skathi.”

Keeping her back to her trusted bodyguard, the silver-haired princess answered her like that and safely turned at the right-angled corner.

Nilda next to her followed suit as well.

The first to notice it then was, as expected, the female warrior Skathi, as she was paying close attention to their surroundings with her eyes most accustomed to the darkness.

“Hm? There is someone ahead of us. I can see a silhouette.”

Upon her remark, both Princess Freya and Nilda stopped and narrowed their eyes to a slit.

“Oh, right. Considering he is coming from that direction, it must be one of our guards.”

With the worst night vision from all of them, Nilda claimed this, but Princess Freya cocked her head dubiously.

“Are you sure? I cannot see it all that well at this distance, but I would say it is someone from the ‘Navarre Kingdom’.”

The delegation from the Navarre Kingdom was the only foreign group invited to this marriage ceremony, so Princess Freya had paid a bit more attention to them than to the others.

Because of that, she could now recognize their military uniform from just a silhouette.

“Eh!?”

Nilda exclaimed surprised, when she heard that.

“Excuse me for a moment.”

Then she approached the silhouette with brisk steps.

“Pardon! Do you have a moment?”

When Nilda called out to it with a loud voice, the silhouette flinched for a second, then stopped.

The dimness hid all the fine features, but judging by the height, it was a man without doubt.

“...Yes?”

And a young man, at that, going by his voice.

His silhouette and voice assured Nilda that he was at least not associated with the House of Guzzle, so she named herself in the semidarkness.

“My name is Nilda, the second daughter of Marquis Guzzle. May I ask you to name yourself?”

“...Yes! I am Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom Delegation.”

The silhouette performed the typical greeting gesture of a knight amidst the darkness and its voice was kind of flat from nervousness.

“Then I shall address you as Sir Raymundo. Pardon my asking, Sir Raymundo, but did you come out of that middle hallway just now?”

Her straightforward question turned out to be counterproductive, though.

“...No. You must have confused it. I came out of that other passage.”

Saying this, the knight from the Navarre Kingdom pointed to the building’s outmost hallway, the one opposite from which Nilda had come out.

The hallways around here were set up a bit complicated.

In this area, three passages were running parallel to each other: The hallway Nilda and

the other two had walked through, the hallway the knight from the Navarre Kingdom had walked through and the hallway pointed out by the same knight just now.

At some point, the two outer passages had a corner at a right angle and were merging with the middle passage. They were standing at that very intersection now.

But even in this darkness, the excuse from the knight was somewhat overdoing things. Nilda definitely had seen him coming out of the middle passage and as a matter of fact, she had stopped the knight right in front of the central hallway.

Nilda showed a troubled smile.

“Well, so you say, but I definitely saw you coming out from there.”

She pressed him slightly.

But even then, the knight did not change his attitude.

“It is quite dark here, so it is not strange for you to make a mistake. Well then, Miss Nilda, I will excuse myself now.”

As if to shake her off, the knight left the place with rapid steps.

“Ah!”

Nilda tried to reach out to him, but her hand only grasped at air.

“...What do I do now? I guess I will have to report this to my father.”

Nilda cocked her head troubled, whereupon Princess Freya and Skathi came over after they had watched the situation unfold from afar.

“Should you have let him leave, Nilda? As far as I could tell, he seems to have set foot into a restricted area without permission.”

The Southern Continent was foreign land to Princess Freya and she was currently

nothing more than the partner for Prince Consort Zenjirou.

Not only did she not know much about the common sense here, she also had no real authority here, so she had just silently observed without interfering, but then she noticed that the situation had taken a rather serious turn.

Nilda showed a troubled smile in reaction to the question from Princess Freya and nodded once.

"Yes. The area beyond that middle passage belongs to our military. That being said, it only contains a little watchtower we rarely ever use, so it is not really an issue, if someone goes there, but we have told the guests that the place is off limits beforehand, so I had no choice but to broach the subject."

Even the mansion of a feudal lord had areas that were off limits to others, guests of state being to exception.

It applied to the private chambers of the lord and his family, the treasury as it was the wallet of the domain and the military facilities as it was the shield of the domain.

Just like Nilda had mentioned, the military facility beyond that hallway, where the knight of the Navarre Kingdom had set foot into, was not really all that important.

As a matter of fact, an interested guest would have easily gotten permission to go there, if he simply asked for it.

But it was a different matter altogether to "ignore someone who had trespassed there".

If they were to let him get away with it here, they would soon have to do the same for the other restricted area as well.

"Seems like I will have to ask my father or brother to reprimand him tomorrow."

Nilda heaved a small sigh after these words. She held no official rank and was just the daughter of a mistress, regardless of her blood relationship, so people always tended to make light of her.

“If you would like, I can come with you to make a testimony.”

“Yes, that would be much appreciated. I am sorry for the trouble, Princess Freya.”

While they were having such an exchange, a bright light flared up behind Nilda.

“Milady, Miss Nilda, please stand back, just in case.”

“Oh my, where has the time gone?”

“That must be Master Zenjirou.”

Princess Freya and Nilda spoke up without due care upon the warning from Skathi, but still obediently got behind her.

The white light was a hundred, more probably a thousand times brighter than the moonlight. Zenjirou was the only person to possess such a thing.

Hence the warning from Skathi had been nothing but a reflex and there was actually no need for wariness.

“Oh, here you are, Princess Freya, Miss Nilda. Then we should get back to the annex building now. The preparations for dinner seem to be done.”

And as expected, Zenjirou appeared from the roofed crossing leading to the annex building with his crank-powered LED flashlight in hand. His bodyguard Knight Natalio and waiting maid Ines followed behind him like always.

“Thank you for going out of your way to pick us up, Your Majesty Zenjirou.”

“Thanks for letting us know, Master Zenjirou.”

Amidst the brilliance of the flashlight, both Princess Freya and Nilda offered Zenjirou words of gratitude with a smile.

During the past few days, the three of them had gotten close to the point that such an exchange was normal to them. The shortage of personnel was actually working in their favour here.

Because of the lack of staff, less people were involved in situations like this one. Moreover, there was not much hustle and bustle in the countryside to begin with, so without knowing, Zenjirou had started to assume quite the “casual” attitude towards Princess Freya and Nilda.

“No, don’t mention it. It allowed me to stretch my legs, too, after all. But it would be rude to let the cooks wait any longer.”

“You are right. Let us head back.”

“Okay, Master Zenjirou.”

The combined group then went back to the annex building with a bit of chit-chat.

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Nilda had caught a knight of the Navarre Kingdom at entering a restricted area without permission.

In itself, that was not such a big deal.

At the very least, the Guzzle Family would have been willing to laugh it off with a “Be more careful next time” as long as the knight apologized with a “I got lost” statement and that would be the end of it.

The reason such a trivial matter escalated into something bigger was that the knight in question thought he could wipe that trivial matter under the carpet as well as his superior supporting his claim well and truly.

“So you refuse to admit it, no matter what, Sir Cristiano?”

The one to speak with a strict voice like that was the third son and successor-to-be of Marquis Guzzle: Xavier Guzzle.

Cristiano Pinto, the Knight Captain of the Navarre Kingdom, assented to the words of the young heir with a deliberate smile as though showing off his composure.

On the morning after that night, Xavier Guzzle had been informed about the incident

by his little sister Nilda and had immediately went to the delegation of the Navarre Kingdom, wanting them to explain the circumstances.

"Yes. It definitely is true that one of my subordinates, Knight Raymundo, was called to a halt by Miss Nilda in the evening of yesterday. But like he had explained back then, Raymundo did not come out of the middle hallway, but had emerged from the outmost passage."

"You mean to say it is nothing but a mistake from Nilda?"

Xavier obviously sharpened his glance, but Knight Captain Cris did not let that attitude affect his smile and simply answered.

"Well, we are talking about evening here. The sun had already set. I dare to say it is not strange for a woman to make such a mistake. I mean, women are prone to fear the darkness, are they not?"

"...Nilda was not alone. Princess Freya as well as her bodyguard Victoria claim the same circumstances."

"Both women, too. Fear and surprise is known to be contagious. Once someone claims something, it is not all that unusual for others to come to the same misunderstanding."

His expression was overflowing with confidence while Knight Captain Cris answered like that. To an onlooker at least it seemed like he believed what he was saying from the bottom of his heart.

"....."

"....."

Sitting across from each other, they stared at each other wordlessly for a while.

Knight Captain Cris was admittedly slender, but was by no means small with his height of more or less one-hundred and eighty centimetre.

The petite Xavier was not even one-hundred and seventy tall, so there was an obvious height difference, which was still all too apparent, when they sat across each other.

Considering that Knight Captain Cris was also a bit older than Xavier, it only looked

like a David versus Goliath situation.

From his behaviour, Xavier could tell that Knight Captain Cris was also the better fighter of them by far, so he had trouble to seize the reins of the negotiations.

Taking a deep breath to provide his body with new oxygen, Xavier then said with a resolute look.

“Okay. It seems we are not on the same page here.”

“Instead of the same page, I say the end is just obvious?”

When Knight Captain Cris gave him a faint smile, Xavier clenched his back teeth.

“I, for one, cannot bring myself to believe that all three witnesses made the same mistake.”

“Sir Xavier, do you mean to imply that a knight of our country is lying then?”

“Yes, that is exactly what I mean.”

“!?”

For the first time today, Knight Captain Cris broke his calm mask in light of Xavier’s clear statement.

“Sir Xavier, are you aware of the significance of your words?”

Knight Captain Cris lowered the tone of his voice, whereas Xavier was extremely careful not to let his voice waver as he answered.

“Yes. I am aware that I would commit a grave defamation, if I were to be wrong. Should it turn out that I suspected the knight of your country wrongfully, I am prepared to make an official apology.”

“.....”

He must not have expected Xavier to stage such a determined opposition. Knight Captain Cris was at a loss for words for a moment.

In all objectivity, though, Xavier actually had no reason to humble himself here.

As the next successor to a March in the Major Power known as Carpa Kingdom, Xavier Guzzle was more or less on equal footing with Cristiano Pinto, who was the oldest son of a famous family with proximity of blood to the Royal Family in the Middle Power known as Navarre Kingdom.

The Carpa Kingdom and Navarre Kingdom were officially acknowledging each other's sovereignty, so of course things would have gone a lot smoother if Xavier just had made compromises to Knight Captain Cris pro forma, but neither did he need to feel obliged to draw in his horns in his position, when their opinions were as contradictory as right now.

“Now, you mentioned earlier that the end was already obvious, but can I take it that you have acknowledged our claim then?”

“...No, it seems we really are not on the same page.”

Even while cladding himself with a mask of inexpressiveness, Knight Captain Cris shook his head with a displeasure he could not conceal entirely.

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Knight Raymundo, a member of the delegation from the Navarre Kingdom, had trespassed into a restricted area.

Three people had witnessed that: Nilda Guzzle, Freya Uppsala and Victoria Kronkvist.

Princess Freya was the partner for Zenjirou, Victoria aka. Skathi was her bodyguard

and Nilda was tasked with taking care of Zenjirou here.

So all three of them had a rather close relation to him.

Hence it was practically an inevitability that Zenjirou would get dragged into this incident as well.

“My deepest apologies, Master Zenjirou. I cannot express nowhere near enough regret for involving Princess Freya in a matter of our family.”

As the morning sun beamed through the windows, Nilda Guzzle lowered her head with bitter regret. Zenjirou responded to her with the softest smile he could manage.

“No, as far as I see it, it was not your fault, Miss Nilda. Princess Freya says so, too. It was just an unfortunate course of events.

And seeing as the delegation from the Navarre Kingdom is involved in this, it is no longer a domestic issue, but an international one. So, as a representative for Queen Aura, I am involved, too. I will help you to the best of my abilities.”

“Thank you very much, Master Zenjirou.”

Nilda was peped up by his words and showed a bright smile.

Her abundant display of emotions made you worry if she could actually survive in the world of nobility.

“For that reason, can you lend her a hand, Princess Freya? If you run into some kind of trouble, you may use my name.”

Princess Freya answered him with a charming smile.

“Of course. Just leave it to me, Your Majesty Zenjirou. Miss Nilda is a dear friend to me as well, so I personally want to help her out in this anyway.

I may not look like it, but I am quite confident in my eyesight at night.”

With these words, she jutted her chin forward in such a way that it seemed playfully at first, but her eyes were by no means smiling.

Gender discrimination against women.

Princess Freya had suffered the same treatment numerous times in her home country, but it was nothing one could get used to.

Contrary to her outward appearance, Princess Freya was quite strong-willed, so she must have felt offended, too, when her own capability was looked down upon.

“Yes, I’m counting on you, Princess Freya.”

“Gladly”

Keeping up her strong-willed smile, Princess Freya swept him a ladified curtsy.

After the two girls left, Zenjirou eased his tension and grumbled in a peeved tone.

“Oh man... What a pain.”

Currently, Zenjirou was all alone in the room with his waiting maid Ines.

A waiting maid was not really a suitable adviser for his current problem, but she was the only person, he could trust and confide in here.

“Hey, Ines, let’s have a little talk. I just want to confirm some things and will make the ultimate decision by myself, but please let me hear your honest opinion.”

“Very well, Master Zenjirou.”

The middle-aged maid just bowed politely as she seemingly had anticipated the request from her master.

Zenjirou nodded once.

"Thanks. Well then, my first question might be common sense, but I want to start with the basics.

Will this incident become more weighty, if 'Nilda is not nobility'?"

He gave voice to his biggest worry first.

In his opinion, it was quite likely that Nilda Guzzle was not a noble.

Needless to say, his reasoning originated from the fact that Queen Aura had not told him about her existence.

All nobility was listed on the "Roll of Names" managed by the Royal Family.

Looking at it the other way round, those not listed on the "Roll of Names" were not officially recognized as noble, even if they legitimately were of noble birth.

Considering Aura had not been aware of Nilda, it was extremely likely that her name was not listed on the Roll of Names.

The middle-aged maid assented his question with a composed look.

"It definitely would become more weighty. In this case, a diplomatic issue."

Zenjirou heaved a sigh in light of his bad premonition coming true.

"I knew it. Just in case: Does the same still apply under the premise that Nilda is completely right and the knight lying?"

"Yes. The hierarchy is more important in this case. The truth is irrelevant. To make things worse, the other party is a knight and the trespassing happened at night.

Something could have been done, though, if it had been a male soldier, commoner even, that stopped him."

"Ah, so they being female is part of the problem, after all. But what could have been done, if it was a soldier? Is the common military that well esteemed?"

His question was met with a diligent explanation from the middle-aged waiting maid.

"No. The reason is that this incident happened during the night patrol. People will even listen to a commoner as long as he is specialized to comment on the matter in question."

For example: A Knight purchases a weapon and then accuses the blacksmith to have swindled him with a defect product. The counterstatement from the blacksmith would be taken into consideration as well then.

Because the blacksmith was even more specialized in weapons than the knight.

But in this case, the incident concerned a trespassing at night.

In a broader sense, it was a military issue. Needless to say, the knight was specializing in that and Nilda was nothing but a little girl with no connection to it.

So, when she turned out to be no noble, like Zenjirou assumed, this incident would become rather troublesome.

"Oh god. Not good. Even if I'm right in assuming that she's not nobility, Nilda currently doesn't seem to be aware of it.

Depending on the circumstances, I might have to talk to Marquis Guzzle and work together with him."

"I dare to say that his would be a bit too risky. Although the possibility is low, the Marquis still might be behind the concealment of her person. And even if no one is behind it, it could actually be a mistake made by the Royal Family."

Considering that, I cannot recommend revealing everything to Marquis Guzzle so easily."

"Oh, right. You've a point... But this is a diplomatic issue, right? It's no longer just between the Royal Family and a Feudal Lord. It would be bad to ignore a diplomatic issue, just to protect the Royal Family. We can't confuse our priorities here."

But in the unlikely event that Marquis Guzzle really is behind this, it would become the worst case scenario. Although it isn't all that likely, we still can't rule it out, so we must keep it in mind..."

With no end to his worries in sight, Zenjirou looked up at the ceiling from his chair.

There were two possibilities: Nilda had her name listed on the “Roll of Names” or not. If it was not listed, there were another two possibilities: Someone plotted it or it was some kind of mistake.

If it was indeed listed, there were no problems at all.

Problems only arose, when her name was not listed on it.

Assuming it was part of a plot, the mastermind behind it could be Marquis Guzzle and it would worsen the situation sharply to consult with him.

On the other hand, if her name was not listed, because of a mere mistake in the paperwork, the best course of action would be to report it to Marquis Guzzle as quickly as possible.

(I think a mistake is more likely, but if I act on that possibility and it turns out to be a plot after all, it's game over.)

The slightest miscalculation could let the best choice result in the worst ending.

Zenjirou could not bring himself to choose a route that might lead to ruin, no matter how low the probability.

“Damn. Nilda sure has bad luck, or should I say bad timing?”

He heaved a sigh, whereupon Ines interjected with a shake of the head.

“Not quite, Master Zenjirou. It was neither bad luck, nor bad timing. It was a bad line of action on her part.”

“Huh?”

Zenjirou cocked his head puzzled, so Ines explained.

“Even if she was of higher birth, a woman would generally be discreet on the surface towards a man in such a situation, where the man claims something to be ‘different’. She ought to have dealt with him by putting a good gloss on her warning.”

In other words, Nilda should have apologized with “I see, please forgive my mistake” at the point, where the knight had claimed “No, you are wrong”.

Then she would keep him in check by saying: “But it is no surprise that a little girl like me would make a mistake, when you abide in such a suspect place. I would appreciate it, if you could refrain from letting me ‘misunderstand’ in the future.”

The knight would be able to bring everything to a smooth end then by answering with “You are right. I am partly to blame for lingering in such a suspicious place, too. I will be more careful from now on. Thank you for your consideration.”

In short, the right line of action involved accepting the claim from the knight on the surface, but cautioning him between the lines.

But Nilda had skipped past that etiquette and opposed him straight on by practically saying “No, I am not mistaken. I saw it. Why are lying to me?”, so the knight ended up persisting on his stance, either due to obstinacy or surprise.

In this sense, you could say that Nilda had made a mistake. Needless to say, it did not change the fact that the knight started all of this by trespassing into the restricted area without permission.

“Oh, right. You did say Nilda was raised in a rural village for quite a while. I guess she hasn’t learnt enough about noble etiquette yet.”

“I am afraid so. The fact that she was born and raised in a rural village means that she initially internalized a different kind of common sense. It cannot be an easy endeavour to overwrite it with the noble mindset later on.”

“Isn’t this even worse?”

Although the knight from the Navarre Kingdom may fundamentally be at fault here, they were at a huge disadvantage, assuming that an actually non-noble girl had reacted in an unbefitting manner for nobility.

“...Maybe I should ask Princess Freya to take the blame?”

The conclusion Zenjirou reached after painstaking contemplation was a somewhat conflicting one for him.

“Princess Freya, you say?”

Cocking her head, the maid asked him that, whereupon Zenjirou nodded and explained his train of thought in detail.

“Well, she was present at the scene, too, so I thought we could make her be in the spotlight instead. Things have already escalated quite a bit, so the Guzzle Family can’t back-pedal anymore and say Nilda was wrong after all at this point, either.

On the other hand, it will be troublesome, when we carry on with Nilda in the spotlight and it becomes apparent later that she is no noble.

So I want Nilda to take a backseat and let Princess Freya assume the role of staging the protest. It should go a lot smoother then.”

“The current circumstances would greatly improve through that for sure, but are you fine with that? Princess Freya is basing her authority here primarily on you, Master Zenjirou.

You would basically be propagating an even stronger bond between the two of you by doing so.”

“I bet...”

Zenjirou heaved a sigh in light of Ines’ advice.

In addition, he would be owing Princess Freya a great debt for having her take the fall in this.

Considering she was aiming to become his concubine, Zenjirou was sure she would never let this chance slip by.

Having said this, he could not come up with a better solution.

And possessing a sense of responsibility stronger than the average as well as a

timidness stronger than the average, Zenjirou inevitable had no choice but to pick the safest way out he could think of.

"I shall ask Princess Freya for help. I will consult with her in person as quick as possible today. We cannot let Miss Nilda know about it, so see to it that Princess Freya comes over alone."

"As you wish."

Ines made a brief bow to his orders.

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Everything started as a trivial argument between Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom and Nilda, the second daughter of Marquis Guzzle, but Knight Captain Cristiano and Xavier Guzzle were respectively negotiating on behalf of the former two and not yielding to the other, fanning the dying embers into a blazing fire.

If the fire were to spread like this, it could even cause some serious damage.

Any person with a bit of prudence could see that the situation had "gone south".

Fortunately enough, the respective people in charge of both parties, Marquis Miguel Guzzle and General Martín Nadal, carried such prudence.

"First of all, let me express my deepest gratitude for setting up this meeting, Marquis Guzzle. It will allow us to prevent the situation to get even more out of hand."

"No, I have to apologize for letting the inappropriate conduct of my daughter to escalate that much, too, General Martín. Besides, I am not the one, who set up this meeting."

Your gratitude is due to my daughter... I mean, Lady Guillén."

While the subordinate and son had glared daggers at each other, the officer and father were exchanging greetings with a smile.

“Indeed. I shall properly thank Lady Lucinda later on.”

General Martín nodded his assent a couple of times.

Their conversation made it redundant to mention, but this meeting had indeed been set up by Lucinda, who had just married into the family of General Puyol.

The two of them sat across each other in the anteroom Lucinda and General Puyol usually used.

After the marriage ceremony, General Martín had requested another meeting with the bridal pair, but Lucinda had “accidentally” scheduled a meeting with her father Marquis Guzzle at the same time.

So the bridal pair was now rearranging their schedule and had General Martín and Marquis Guzzle wait in the “same” anteroom in the meantime.

As such, General Martín and Marquis Guzzle were making use of the “coincidental” occasion of waiting in the same room to have an unofficial meeting, exchanging opinions as the ringleaders.

The whole situation was easy to see through, but these kind of pretexts were very important in Higher Society.

Neither side would be able speak their mind in an official meeting, where one side was the host and the other side the guest, because they had to keep up appearance.

In an informal place like this, the old Marquis and the middle-aged General could converse without restrain.

After a simple greeting, Marquis Guzzle broached the topic at hand.

“To be honest, I am well aware that this is just a stupid argument about a trivial misunderstanding, so if possible, I want to end this without much fuss.”

"I agree. Normally this would be solved with a verbal warning and a verbal apology, so I would appreciate it, if we could do just that."

Although there was quite the age difference between them, they talked to each other on an equal footing.

On top of being quite close in social standing, Marquis Guzzle respected General Martín for being the better soldier of them, whereas General Martín respected Marquis Guzzle for his long history of military services, making it a sound relationship of mutual respect between them.

Nevertheless, they were still a Feudal Lord and a General from bordering countries.

Of course they were harbouring some negative feelings towards the other somewhere deep down in their hearts, but both of them held the other in high enough esteem to not let it show on their faces.

Thanks to that, the meeting proceeded smoothly.

"Geez, Xavier takes too much after my younger self. In a bad way, that is. He is inflexible and always clings to appearance, when trying to resolve things. The actual truth aside, there would have been nothing wrong with formally admitting that Nilda had been in the wrong here."

"I reckon you have your problems with him."

Even while agreeing with him like that, General Martín could not keep himself from giving a wry smile.

The words from Marquis Guzzle sounded like he wanted to say that he himself had become flexible by now, but that was by no means the case.

The man called Miguel Guzzle was actually so bad at equivocation and charisma that it was rather impressive how he could live as nobility in a major power like that.

"Haha, you have got me there. Well, there is no point in beating around the bush now, so let me be frank:

The knight in your group, I think his name was Raymundo, did trespass into the restricted area, right?"

Although this was an unofficial meeting, the question from the elderly noble was sharply straight-forward, so General Martín obfuscated the wry smile on his bear-like face and nodded once.

"Yeah. Cris does not seem to have pressed him enough, so we do not have a confession from the man himself, but given the circumstances, there can be no doubt he did it."

This honest concession could be made, precisely because it was an unofficial meeting. One that practically had never taken place, so to speak.

Marquis Guzzle was neither surprised, nor angered by his answer; He simply accepted it with a nonchalant tone.

"I thought so. Well, Nilda is not one to lie about such things. And it is almost laughable to call it a mistake, when there are three witnesses."

"I wish Miss Nilda would have been a bit more tactful, though. My knight certainly started things, but she seemed to have pressed him direct and straight-forward.

Even I would have been left with no other choices but to either apologize wholeheartedly or feign ignorance in face of such a cornering question."

General Martín pulled a slightly wry face after these words.

"I have to bear the blame for that instead of my daughter. My teachings were poorly. Forgive me. I am sure you already noticed it, but she is not the child of my legal wife and was raised in a rural village until she was nine."

"Oh, she seems to have a good head on her shoulders for all that, though. I take back my earlier words. You do have a good hand at raising your children."

"No need to take it back. It is all thanks to Lucinda that Nilda has grown into what she is now. But it is my responsibility that she is still lacking education."

Marquis Guzzle shook his head with these words.

The fact that he easily admitted that spoke for his integrity, but also for his flaws as

nobility.

He unintentionally had given General Martín a valuable piece of information: Marquis Guzzle was holding his daughter Lucinda in extremely high esteem.

“I see. You must be very proud of your eldest daughter.”

Nodding with a composed look, General Martín innerly renewed his wariness towards General Puyol.

“Well, enough of that. We were talking about Miss Nilda and Knight Raymundo.

Under normal circumstances, this issue could have ended with a verbal warning and apology, but Knight Captain Cris and Sir Xavier have clashed head-on, so it can no longer be resolved that easily.”

“We are meeting here to keep the consequences as little as possible.”

When Marquis Guzzle said declaratory, General Martín showed a somewhat sly smile and replied provocative.

“Well, yes, but we two are already on the same page here. A further escalation is basically off the table. Considering that, I kind of want to squeeze a profit from it now.

So here is my proposal: How about we decide on some key conditions amongst us and let the youngsters give it a try until they contradict these? I dare to say it would be a valuable experience for Sir Xavier, too.”

“Hmm... You do have a point... But I am not fond of lying to my son like that. Then again, it is an effective way... Hmm.”

The suggestion from General Martín prompted Marquis Guzzle to frown uncomfortably, but he gave it some thought anyway.

His proposal was not all that difficult to understand.

He was basically saying: "Why don't we use this opportunity to let our youngsters gain some experience while we clear up matters?"

In fact, the current situation was predestinated for it.

The two youngsters had completely different opinions and were clashing with each other in negotiations, but behind their backs, their superiors aka. Marquis Guzzle and General Martín had reached an agreement on not letting the matter escalate any further.

To be honest, it was a once-in-a-lifetime chance.

Because Knight Captain Cris and Xavier could experience a genuine negotiation concomitant with all its pressure while their superiors could always step in when it looked like either side was about to screw up.

In short: It was the perfect opportunity to let the two youngsters, who were not used to dealing with foreigners, gain experience in a riskless environment.

Both of them would surely be offended, when they learned that their superiors had actually watched out for them all the time while they presumably negotiated in all seriousness, but that was also part of their "training".

"What do you say, Marquis Guzzle? Care to give it a try?"

"Hmm..."

Although he did understand its merits, Marquis Guzzle was still hesitating, simply because that method went against his preferences.

As a truthful soldier, he never hesitated in the slightest to deceive his enemy, but he could not bring himself to cheat his allies or family that easily.

Nevertheless, Marquis Guzzle had also told his soldiers before that reinforcements were coming, even though that was not the case, to keep up the morale. And sometimes he had exaggerated the strength of the enemy force for a battle they were expected to win with ease, to keep them on guard.

Lies could be an expedient, too. Marquis Guzzle was not so obstinate that he would not understand that, so after a moment of careful deliberation, the elderly feudal lord

nodded with a grim look.

"Oh well. Let us do it. Its merit is certainly beyond doubt. But are you fine with that? Knight Captain Cris does not know that the false testimony from your knight is the cause of all this, does he? If worst comes to worst, he might lose his position."

"Such is life."

When Marquis Guzzle remarked considerately, General Martín brushed it aside flatly.

"He cannot expect any mercy, if he rashly throws a fit."

"I know. I will deal with him in that case. What about the opposite then?

It is quite possible that my Cris will pull through and have your side admit that it was a mistake, too."

"The official announcement aside, I want you to scold your knight and knight captain in private then. I will keep my son in check myself. It might not be pleasant, but I know that an 'unreasonable defeat' in a negotiation can be a valuable experience later on.

But emotions are a different matter altogether. I cannot stop my son and daughter from harbouring reservation towards you. Is that alright?"

Marquis Guzzle asked just in case, whereupon General Martín pondered for a while and then assented.

"Hmm, in that case, I personally shall apologize to Sir Xavier and Miss Nilda in private."

He certainly wanted to avoid having the successor of a neighbouring domain harbour any ill feelings towards him.

On this view, it would be more convenient for him, when Knight Captain Cris actually lost the case this time round.

In case of his loss, General Martín could let him experience the "aftermath of a defeat" and have no bad blood with the Carpa Kingdom.

On the other hand, a victory would only earn him the achievement of having enforced the lie of the knight, but at the cost of giving the successor of the neighbouring March

a bad impression of himself.

Well, it would be an extremely valuable experience for a different meaning, when the knight turned a lie into the truth through negotiations, so a victory would not be a bad deal per se, but a loss would still be a lot more advantageous in comparison.

Anyway, everything seemed to settle without a problem at a glance, but Zenjirou would surely turn pale in the face and raise a scream, if he could have listened to this conversation.

Either the lie from Knight Raymundo was exposed and Knight Captain Cris had to apologize.

Or the lie was approved and General Martín unofficially apologized to Xavier and Nilda.

The peaceful conclusion of both cases was built on the assumption that “Nilda was nobility”.

If it then became known at a later date that Nilda Guzzle was no official noble, it would turn into a real mess.

But without the knowledge of that fundamental requirement, the conclusion from the two men was extremely reasonable and realistic.

“Good. It was a fruitful discussion. I definitely have to thank Lady Guillén for it.”

“Yes. No matter how it ends, we have avoided the worst scenario with this.”

Oblivious to the fragile first piece in their line of reasoning, General Martín and Marquis Guzzle exchanged these nonchalant words and laughed together.

## Intermission 2

# The Queen has Confidence

“Then Nilda is a member of the Guzzle House without a doubt?”

The Queen checked with the plump middle-aged noble sitting across her, who then nodded his sweaty head.

“Y- Yes. Of that there is no doubt. I have always been serving here in the Capital, so I have not confirmed it with my own eyes, but we actually do have an attested copy of the ‘Roll of Names’. Please address the Marquis directly, if you wish to confirm it.”

He replied with a resolute tone.

“Yes, I shall allow myself to do so later on. It is not like I am doubting the Guzzle House, but the name Nilda Guzzle is not listed on our ‘Roll of Names’.”

“I- Impossible...”

Taken by surprise, the middle-aged noble agitatedly shook his round head with a double chin.

“Calm down, Sir Severo. I will repeat myself: I am not doubting the Guzzle House. Marquis Guzzle found out about Nilda during the previous war, correct? So a natural explanation could be that there was a discrepancy in the communication during all the commotion of the war.”

Aura maintained her composure as she reassured the round-faced noble of middle age called Severo.

Severo was a vassal serving Marquis Guzzle, tasked with the position as his representative in the Capital. It goes without saying that it was one of the best appointments amongst the vassals of the Guzzle House.

It might be easier to understand, when comparing it with the Karou of Edo Japan, representatives of the Feudal Lords dispatched to the Shogun in Edo.

Anyway, Severo calmed down a bit in light of the words from the Queen and answered while wiping the sweat of his forehead with a handkerchief.

“C- Certainly. I apologize for losing my composure just now.”

“I do not blame you. It is quite the surprise for me as well.”

“Hearing that gives me a little peace of mind.”

“Good. I have no intention to stir up the matter, but a mistake in the ‘Roll of Names’ can by no means be overlooked. I wish to resolve this situation as quickly as possible. Depending on the circumstances, I may have to ‘leap’ a messenger from here to the March of Guzzle, so prepare accordingly.”

“V- Very well!”

Severo lowered his head so deeply it looked like he was folding his corpulent body.



When the door closed with a click, Aura immediately wiped the serene expression off her face and said with a voice deep like a growling beast.

“...What a pain this has become.”

“It sure has.”

Standing next to her, the secretary gave a cold reply, whereupon Queen Aura shot a fierce glance of anger at him for a moment, but regained her composure right after.

“Judging by his reaction, the Guzzle House really seems to have heard nothing about this.”

“That much seems clear. The people of the Guzzle Family are often not adept at deception to begin with and I am sure they are very well aware how much of risk it would be to make a false testimony about a copy of the ‘Roll of Names’.”

The “Roll of Names” assured the status of nobility, so any forgery or falsehood of its copies was immediately punished with the death sentence. It would be far too risky to get involved in that, considering the Guzzle House was actually in the Royal Family’s confidence the most of all the Feudal Lords.

“Then this issue is not caused by a scheme from someone, but rather a simple misunderstanding. A mere act of negligence, so to say. Moreover, the name is not in our ‘Roll of Names’, but is listed on their copy, so it is quite likely our mistake.”

For some kind of reason, the “Roll of Names” from the Royal Family was lacking a name. That was the only possible explanation right now. And as much as it pained her to admit it, Aura had an idea about what caused that discrepancy.

“Marquis Guzzle took Nilda in, when she was nine years-old. Right now, she is fifteen years-old. With a little bit of math, you can easily figure out who the ‘culprit’ is.”

“His Late Majesty Sancho.”

"Yeah, Sancho alright."

Aura assented with a bitter expression.

Sancho I. He was the King of the Carpa Kingdom two generations ago and also the little brother of Aura.

Also known as the "King of Revenge", he had sworn to avenge his beloved brother Enrique IV., who had been king before him, and spent the majority of his short reign on the battlefield. To the bitter end in fact. With a spear deeply pierced into his stomach, his chest penetrated by arrows and beheaded from behind with a straight cut, his corpse had been mutilated to the point that it was unclear which of his wounds had been the fatal one.

During the time Nilda was supposedly added to the "Roll of Names", that very Sancho I. had been on the throne.

It was not unthinkable that they forgot to update the "Roll of Names" during the turmoil of the war.

"But in that case, it is entirely our— the Royal Family's fault. We have to handle this carefully or we will sow unnecessary resentment."

"On top of that, we must be apprehensive of more far reaching repercussions than just the Guzzle Family. If your assumption proves to be right, Your Majesty, it would not be all that strange for a couple of other nobles to be in the same situation as Miss Nilda."

The war did not only claim the life of Sancho I, but also a part of the "Roll of Names" along with him. It would be excessively optimistic to assume that the name of Nilda Guzzle was the only one missed out like that.

"...I bet. But for now, our problem is Nilda. Ultimately, I will check on her and their copy of the 'Roll of Names' before adding her name to the list once more, but the problem is how and when I should broach that subject to them."

"It only takes a moment to leap someone with official documents over there with your magic, I reckon?"

The Queen pondered on the suggestion from her secretary for a while, but shook her head in the end.

“...No. Now is not a good time. The March of Guzzle currently has a lot of nobility attending the marriage ceremony, so it would bring shame on the Guzzle House, if that information were to be delivered now.

Marquis Guzzle has appointed Nilda as the caretaker of my husband. It would totally get out of hand, if it becomes known that Nilda is no noble under these circumstances.”

If it turned out that he had appointed his illegitimate and non-noble daughter to wait on Royalty, it would be a huge scandal. Of course it would work out, when it became known that the Royal Family had been at fault for it, but depending on the timing for revealing the information, others might initially get the impression that “Marquis Guzzle had been overstepping the mark”.

“Yes, and given his personality, it certainly would be audacious to expect Marquis Guzzle to smooth things over properly once he learns of the truth, so I understand your reasoning, but I dare to say that we neither cannot ignore the possibility that some kind of problem will arise, when we leave him in the dark like this. What is your view on this subject, Your Majesty?”

The Queen’s answer to her secretary’s question was extremely simple.

“I will leave it up to my husband.”

“Oho?”

Secretary Fabio had a curious glint in the eyes, whereupon Aura shrugged her shoulders a bit and waved around the letter Zenjirou had sent with the Small Flying Dragon.

“Seeing as he sent me such a report, my husband also noticed that Nilda might actually not be nobility. You know how prudent he is. He will without a doubt assume the worst case scenario and act upon the premise that ‘Nilda is no nobility’. So even if something were to happen, it will be nothing critical.”

“You seem to have a lot of confidence in him.”

The Queen threw out her voluminous chest and replied to the comment of her secretary.

“Obviously. Apart from his capabilities, I trust no one more than my husband, when it comes to personality or relating to my will. Even though he admittedly does not have the ability to achieve the best possible outcome, I can ensure that he does have the ability to avoid the worst case scenario.”

From her point of view, Zenjirou was akin to a Raptorial Dragon that ran into the direction she wished for, even without any instructions. Although he might not be all that fast and was more of a pack dragon variant of the pack horse, Aura was feeling absolutely confident that he would rather stay put then and there instead of proceeding into a direction opposing her will.

Considering her profound faith in Zenjirou, it was easily understandable why Aura decided against leaping someone to the March of Guzzle.

Leaping a person with “Teleport” was exactly the same as announcing publicly that the matter was of great urgency. It would clearly draw unnecessary attention to it.

On top of that, one could not really call Marquis Guzzle, the would-be receiver of the message, to be good at sophistry, even as flattery. So it was more than likely that they would open a can of worms instead.

“Then we will be entrusting the matter to Master Zenjirou until he returns?”

“Yes, indeed. As long as it does not put his life at risk like in Valentia, I can fully trust in his judgment. We are better off not taking any hasty actions in this case.”

“Very well. Then I shall prepare everything for resuming the discussion as soon as Master Zenjirou returns to the Capital.”

“Yes, do that.”

And just like that, the Queen and her trusted retainer arrived at a conclusion that would make Zenjirou scream “too much responsibility!”, if he were to hear of it.

# Chapter 4

## Neck-and-neck Argument

“Like I said before, I definitely saw Sir Raymundo coming out of the middle pathway without a doubt. How often do I have to repeat myself? If you want to have it pegged as my mistake, please show me proper proof.”

“Please calm down, Princess Freya. Raymundo claims he exited from the outmost passage.

I believe in my subordinate, so it pains me to say this, but there is no other explanation than you having made a mistake.”

“Then, do you have some kind of evidence to your claim of me making a mistake? I would be fine with some proof to the validity of the testimony from Sir Raymundo as well. How do you expect me to calm down, when all you do is one-sidedly insist that I made a mistake without showing me any proof whatsoever?”

“I do know how you feel, Princess, but please calm down for now. We will not get anywhere, when we bicker right from the start.”

Princess Freya argued vehemently with a glint of anger in her ice-blue eyes, whereupon Knight Captain Cris showed a troubled wry smile while replying like that.

The smile seemed to imply that he still had some composure to spare on the matter, but his eyes were obfuscated with a tint of confusion.

Well, that was only understandable. Originally, this incident had been acknowledged as a conflict of opinion between Raymundo, the Knight from the Navarre Kingdom, and Nilda, the second daughter of Marquis Guzzle.

And yet, Princess Freya was openly going on the offensive here despite being more or less just a bystander. Normally that was unthinkable.

Moreover, the common sense of the South Continent dictated that a woman should not lash out at a man on an official occasion like this, even if she happened to be a royal

princess.

Needless to say, Aura was an exception, because she was the Monarch, but women usually never cornered a man, even if she was of higher status.

Princess Freya in particular was currently putting the moves on a man, namely Zenjirou, so one was actually expecting that she would refrain from doing anything that a man would generally consider as “unsightly” or “presumptuous”.

With that in mind, Knight Captain Cris shifted his gaze towards Zenjirou sitting next to her for a moment, but it was like barking up the wrong tree.

(Nice going! Keep it up, Princess Freya.)

Zenjirou was supporting Princess Freya with all his might at heart.

To begin with, Princess Freya was launching the all-out attack here, because Zenjirou had asked her to, so he would end up betraying her, if he took offense at her actions now.

Maintaining a fake smile, Zenjirou simply watched the matter unfold.

“I may be a woman, but I do have taken part in night activities during hunts or sea travels. I have even been on watch at sea during the night, albeit not on my own, as you might expect. So I just cannot let it go unchallenged, when you arbitrarily decide on a ‘mistake’ of mine without any proof.”

The Navarre Kingdom was not the only side perplexed by the unexpected aggressive attitude from Princess Freya.

Nilda Guzzle and her brother Xavier Guzzle, the original adversaries in this matter, could not conceal their bewilderment, either, and were speaking panic-stuck.

“P- Princess Freya? I will be just fine. Just having you by my side is already enough for me.”

"She is right, Princess Freya. Please calm down a bit. Master Zenjirou is watching, you know."

Nilda never had any intentions to make a big deal out of it, so she was stepping on the brakes before she knew it. The same applied to Xavier, even though he had been eager to fight it out with Knight Captain Cris before.

Xavier was obviously signalizing him a SOS with his gaze, but Zenjirou pretended not to see it, even if he felt guilty about it at heart.

"....."

He said nothing and just smiled as if to say "I don't mind at all", which in turn prompted Xavier to look bewildered and Knight Captain Cris to screw up his nose in contempt.

They did not know his real motive, but everyone realized that he at least had no intentions to box Princess Freya in here and now.

All of them averted their eyes from the silently smiling Zenjirou and resumed the discussion.

Knight Captain Cris cleared his throat with a cough in order to pull himself together again.

"I do see your point, Princess Freya. You certainly seem to have a good eyesight at night for a woman. I was a bit too hasty in my judgement just now. I apologize for that."

Saying so, he lowered his head a bit while remaining seated on the couch.

"....."

Princess Freya did not object the apology with words, but her ice-blue eyes were obviously narrowed to slits in anger.

Zenjirou considered it only natural that Princess Freya was getting angry, but apparently only Princess Freya herself and her bodyguard Skathi standing behind her

were sharing that sentiment.

No one perceived the “apology” from Knight Captain Cris as offending. That obviously applied to the people from the Navarre Kingdom, but also to their own allies: Xavier and Nilda. The latter even being a fellow woman. If anything, the majority of people would say that Princess Freya “ought to accept his apology, even if only formally”, now that Knight Captain Cris had gone so far as to apologize to her.

(But for Princess Freya, the “for a woman” part sounded more like picking another fight with her. It’s already plenty rude towards a captain, who succeeded in travelling between the continents, as it is.)

Princess Freya had developed a good eyesight at night through actual experiences during hunts or sea travels, so she prided herself on having an ability “good enough to apply it in the field”, so even when she was complimented with the words “not bad for a woman”, it did not count as a compliment at all.

It was beyond all question for Zenjirou that Princess Freya would not accept the apology from Knight Captain Cris, but unfortunately, his moral values were not the standard on the South Continent. If anything, they were a severe abnormality.

Somewhat displeased as expected, Princess Freya fortunately still had enough reasoning to not express her anger right here and now.

She overlooked the apology from Knight Captain Cris and continued the discussion with even more direct words.

“You have been doing all the talking so far, Sir Cristiano, but I would like to hear the opinion from the man in question himself. Sir Raymundo, we did meet last night, correct? Do you still remember me?”

Suddenly addressed, the young knight gulped surprised for a moment, but then answered with a stiff voice.

“Yes, of course I remember you. You did not speak up last night, so I cannot be certain for sure, but your hair was vividly revealed amidst the dim light.”

As Knight Raymundo had mentioned, the blue-tinged silver hair from Princess Freya was standing out quite a bit, even in the darkness. Of course it would get lost in a pitch-black darkness, but with the slightest bit of light, her silver hair would shine vividly even at night.

Princess Freya seemed content with his answer for now as she nodded with a slightly more relaxed expression.

"I am glad you remember. Then we can proceed under the premise that I was present back then without a doubt. And I can say with certainty that I saw you coming out of the 'middle hallway'.

I hereby declare now and here that I have no intentions to take back these words.

Do you still refuse to admit it then, Sir Raymundo?"

Princess Freya slowly narrowed her ice-blue eyes to slits challengingly, whereupon the young knight from the Navarre Kingdom kept an inexpressive look and answered her immediately with a firm voice, probably because his truculence had been triggered.

"Yes. I did come out of the outmost passage, not the middle one."

After things had escalated this far, he probably could not pull back, even if he wanted to. The young knight insisted so, putting up a painful brave front.

Their claims were polar oppositions. And neither side had any proof to invalidate the argument of the other.

So they had no choice but to convince or else weaken the other side in a debate, but as things stood at the moment, it would end up a fruitless debate no matter how much words they exchanged.

"We both have confirmed the standpoint of the other, so how about we call it a day for now?"

Hence Xavier suggested a break, to which no one objected.

Accepting the call for a break from Xavier, the members of the delegation from the Navarre Kingdom left the room together with an obstinate look in their eyes.

Once Knight Raymundo and Knight Captain Cris from the Navarre Kingdom had left, Zenjirou finally spoke up after keeping quiet for so long.

“Sir Xavier, we have stuck our noses in your business here.

Of course we do not have forgotten that this is the March of Guzzle and that all responsibility and authority to accommodate a difference here reside in the Marquis.

The Marquis will have the final say in this matter and we have no intention to go against his judgement. I just wanted you to know this.”

“Yes, thank you for your consideration, Master Zenjirou.”

Zenjirou offered him an apology with a serious expression and an attitude as polite as possible between Royalty and his subject. Xavier accepted it with a relieved look.

This was the troublesome aspect of a feudal system.

The Carpa Kingdom had an extraordinary powerful Royal Family for a feudal state, but even so, it would be extremely risky for them to trample on the authority of the feudal lords.

As a general rule, the feudal lord had the right to handle everything that happened within his domain as he saw fit.

Of course he would not have the authority to judge Zenjirou, if the Prince Consort himself were to be involved in the matter directly, but this case only involved his partner Princess Freya, so the final decision was still up to Marquis Guzzle.

But it posed no problem, when Zenjirou asked the Marquis for some “careful deliberation”, and it would only be natural for Marquis Guzzle to be mindful of the request.

Nevertheless, the actual decision-making power had to lie with Marquis Guzzle whilst he took the request into consideration at most.

So Zenjirou had announced that he was aware of that and had no intention to meddle with the authority of the feudal lord.

Now that the atmosphere had loosened up a bit, Zenjirou frowned a bit troubled on purpose and glanced at the northern princess sitting besides him.

“But I am taking Princess Freya’s side here. Of course her being my partner right now is one reason, but more importantly, I believe in her testimony and acknowledge her opposition as legitimate.

I just wanted to make that clear.”

“Yes, I shall keep it in mind.”

Xavier lowered his head with a meek look in light of Zenjirou’s declaration.

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Shortly afterwards, Zenjirou and Princess Freya returned to their allocated annex building.

When waiting maid Ines closed the door with a thud, Zenjirou immediately faced the silver-haired princess.

“Princess Freya, you have my gratitude for giving in to my wish this time. I am well aware that I should not have asked this of a lady, but you went along with me anyway, so I will be sure to reciprocate the favour in some way later on.”

As stated above, her earlier aggressive attitude had entirely been plotted by Zenjirou.

It was highly likely that Nilda Guzzle was not nobility. As a consequence, it also made it possible that things would escalate into major diplomatic issue, if they were to progress with the Nilda Guzzle vs. Knight Raymundo setting.

Even if Nilda were to swallow his lie and apologized to him, the fact remained that she had “rebuked a knight from a different country”. And in case that she was not noble, that fact would turn into “a commoner girl having criticized a knight”.

Accordingly, any later repercussions would be less painful, when Princess Freya, the one with the highest status amongst the involved, just snatched away the spotlight.

The best outcome would be that Princess Freya won the negotiations, proving that Knight Raymundo had lied.

Needless to say, Knight Raymundo had lied and fled the place, so it was a stain on his reputation. One he would like to erase, if possible. The same applied to Knight Captain Cris, who had swallowed his lie and stood up for him.

Under these circumstances, it was quite likely they would accept the proposal of “pretending nothing of this ever happened”.

And since it would have never happened to begin with then, they would not be able to complain, when it turned out later that Nilda was not nobility.

With that in mind, Zenjirou had asked Princess Freya to play the somewhat unfavourable role, but she had accepted more eagerly than he had expected.

“Your wish is my command, Your Majesty Zenjirou. Besides, I do not need to play-act in this case, actually.

If anything, I am grateful you gave me a chance to speak my mind out.”

Saying this, Princess Freya smiled while her eyes glinted with a wild resolve.

“I am glad to hear that. Unfortunately, I cannot reveal the whole truth to you. It really weighs on my mind.”

As he had mentioned, Zenjirou had not explained his assumption of “Nilda likely not

being nobility" to Princess Freya.

That goes without saying. She might be set on becoming his concubine and acting as his partner right now, but she was still the royalty from a different country after all.

He could not trust her so much yet as to open his heart and reveal everything to her.

Princess Freya was aware of that, too, of course.

"Please pay it no mind, Your Majesty. I am Royalty myself, so I do understand that we are sometimes forced to put aside our feelings or honesty."

"Thank you, Princess Freya."

Zenjirou showed a relieved smile, but that unconscious reaction of his proved that he had grown closer to her.

Between the lines of "we are forced to put aside our feelings or honesty" was the hidden meaning of "wanting to just say everything out aloud if not for their positions" and Zenjirou could not bring himself to deny that.

In other words, he had become at least so attached to Princess Freya that he wanted to treat her with sincerity as much as possible, even without knowing it.

Zenjirou himself did not seem to be aware of his change of heart, but Princess Freya had apparently noticed it.

".....Ahem."

Behind the right hand she used to cover up her clearing her throat as she looked down, Princess Freya twisted her small lips into a faint smile.

"Pardon me."

By the time she raised her head, the smile had vanished, but her ice-blue eyes were the epitome of sincerity.

"I would like to confirm our future plans then. Am I right in thinking that I am to push the 'truth' through obstinately from now on as well?"

The conversation shifted to business, so Zenjirou pulled himself together, too, and pondered.

"Hmm... That should be fine for now. But we cannot have the current deadlock go on forever, of course, so we definitely should settle this as quickly as possible."

At the present time, both parties stood in stark contrast to each other with their claims, neither of them having evidence or witness to make the other side surrender.

It would probably be bad for the delegation of the Navarre Kingdom as well, when the current deadlock persisted.

In the beginning, it might have only been a small quarrel, but depending on the circumstances, it could escalate into a full-scale war between the two countries. The world was such a scary place.

In the past, an argument between hunters over a single Meat Dragon that had entered and collapsed in another country had actually resulted in war between the two countries.

Having said this, it did not mean one should avoid quarrels per se and always submit to the other party. That would chip away at the reputation and authority of the country.

Hence, the representatives of countries were always keeping in mind "not to escalate things" while acting under the presumption that "the other does not want things to escalate either", starting a game of chicken neither side wanted.

And this case was showing signs of becoming a game of chicken as well.

They needed to resolve it before that happened. In his mind, Zenjirou had already formulated a plan for that.

But that plan was still full of loopholes right now and it was extremely unlikely it would hold out until the "checkmate" point.

Hence he asked Princess Freya for her cooperation once again.

“In any event, it is an undeniable fact that they are lying. Our problem is that we have no evidence to verify it. But even if we cannot do that, what we can do is winkle out an unmistakable statement from them.

I more or less have a plan for that, but I want your help in that. What do you say, Princess Freya?”

In reaction, Princess Freya tilted her head so that her short silver hair waved.

“Of course I do not mind helping out. And I may be a bit late in asking this, but what makes you so sure that their knight is lying, Your Majesty Zenjirou?”

She looked Zenjirou directly into the eyes.

Needless to say, it was only obvious that Zenjirou would completely side with Princess Freya in public, given his position, but his earlier phrasing seemed to say that it was not just for appearances' sake, but that he was actually profoundly convinced that Princess Freya was saying the whole truth and the knight from the Navarre Kingdom was lying on purpose.

Zenjirou blinked surprised for a moment in light of her question, then answered with a soft smile.

“Oh, it is quite simple. I was pretty much present back then myself.

Please think back on it. The place in question is a crossroad, where three parallel hallways come together.

You three came out of the ‘innermost hallway’, which leads into the main building, ran into Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom, who came out of the ‘middle hallway’, which leads to the virtually restricted area, and rebuked him.

But Knight Raymundo claims he did not come out of the ‘middle hallway’, but out of the ‘outmost hallway’, which leads to the annex building. Am I right so far?”

“Yes, you are.”

Princess Freya nodded a little bit in agreement, whereupon Zenjirou gave a nod as well and went on with a slightly proud look.

“Have you forgotten already? A bit afterwards, I came to pick you up. Which hallway do you think I used back then?”

“Ah?”

His hint prompted Princess Freya to exclaim in surprise all too late.

“Exactly. I passed through the ‘outmost hallway’. So if Knight Raymundo were saying the truth, he would have walked in front of me. But I did not see him at that time.

In other words, he is obviously lying.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Princess Freya replied to his explanation pensively.

On second thought, it truly was self-explanatory.

A little bit delayed, Zenjirou had indeed come out of the hallway Knight Raymundo had claimed to have passed through, so both of them should have met there, unless they were blind-folded.

After all, the outmost hallway was drawing a long and straight line.

There was no way to miss Knight Raymundo, if he had actually passed through there.

“Then if you just were to give a testimony...!”

Princess Freya saw their chance in his testimony, so she blurted it out on the spot, but Zenjirou shook his head with a calm look on his face.

“It would be meaningless at this point of time. The matter has already become too complicated after all. Even if I were to say something, the Navarre Kingdom will not budge from their obstinacy. And in fact, we have nothing to back up my testimony anyway.”

Right after Knight Raymundo had left, Zenjirou had shown up from the outmost passage. It would be nothing but another subjective claim from Princess Freya, though.

Without mechanical clocks, this world had a rather vague sense of time, so even if Princess Freya were to claim that “Zenjirou appeared right after Raymundo left”, they would oppose by saying that “more time must have passed than she initially thought” and they would be back to square one.

“But unlike in my case, would they not actually listen to you, Your Majesty Zenjirou?”

Her expectation was partly wishful thinking and Zenjirou dismissed it with another shake of his head.

“I am afraid it will not be that easy. True, I may be Royalty and a male, but I am still not a ‘soldier’ after all.”

As Royalty, his words definitely could not be taken lightly, but since he was always preaching that “he was no fighter”, it became a huge disadvantage in this case.

Even if he were to claim that “he came out of the passage shortly after, but did not see anyone there on that night”, everyone would just treat it as the “whimsical opinion of a civilian, who was neither trained in seeing in the night, nor in mental power”, but not necessarily say it out aloud.

Knight Captain Cris in particular seemed to look down on Zenjirou.

Needless to say, Zenjirou was Royalty of the major power known as the Carpa Kingdom. If he were to push the issue through by saying “I am in the right. And you actually dare to oppose me? I hope you are prepared for the consequences.”, people would usually cave in unless they were unsophisticated fanatics.

But it goes without saying that it would be the worst method to bring this matter to an end.

At the international level, it would actually be wiser to just completely admit defeat and apologize for the three women seeing wrong, before doing that.

Hence Zenjirou had to seal his greatest asset: the royal title.

(Since I can’t use my royal authority, I’m just one of the many peasants...)

Even while harbouring such a self-assurance that was close to self-torment, Zenjirou contemplated on how to resolve this matter as smoothly as possible.

(At this point, a wholesome conclusion doesn't seem viable. Well, that Knight Raymundo reaps what he sow. He'll have to swallow the bitter pill.)

"Anyway, it is obvious that Knight Raymundo is lying. So if we manage to expose his lie, it will be our win.

I have an idea, or rather a little sham in mind for that and I would like to have your cooperation in it, Princess Freya."

"Oh my, that sounds interesting. Of course I will participate."

Crossing her arms before her chest, Princess Freya showed a bright smile while her eyes revealed a sadistic glint, the type of pleasure you took from mowing your enemies down.

"Well, excuse me then."

Leaving these words behind, Princess Freya and her female bodyguard left the room, so Zenjirou was all alone with waiting maid Ines now.

As such, Zenjirou could slovenly slouch on the couch.

"Whoa, this has become such a pain in the ass..."

"Stay strong, Master Zenjirou. You are sweating a bit around your neck."

"Mm, thanks, Ines."

The considerate maid handed him a towel, which he used to wipe his neck and face clean. Feeling a bit refreshed, Zenjirou then took a deep breath.

"By the way, Ines, any word from Aura yet?"

"No. There have been no news from the Capital."

Zenjirou wrinkled his forehead in light of the straightforward answer from Ines.

“Weird... Isn’t it?”

“Yes. The Small Flying Dragon we sent should have arrived some time ago. If Her Majesty Aura had wanted to answer it, her reply would have arrived by now.”

The instantaneous “Teleport” aside, even the returning “Small Flying Dragon” was strangely overdue for some time already.

In other words, Queen Aura had no intention to send a reply.

Zenjirou crossed his arms and pondered about its meaning.

“Does that mean Aura’s not viewing this matter as that important?

...No, that can’t be right. She would reassure me with a letter then.

Then it’s the other way round. I broached a subject so delicate that she can’t ‘leap’ a person or send a Small Flying Dragon so easily.”

Before long, Zenjirou reached the same conclusion as Aura in the Capital.

It was the kind of conclusion anyone with a bit of knowledge and minimal intellectual grasp could reach.

Leaping a person with the “Teleport Magic” was practically the same as announcing the “occurrence of an emergency” and messages with a Small Flying Dragon had a high risk of falling into the wrong hands.

Thinking along these lines, it was only natural to reach the conclusion that “the matter was too delicate for a simple reply”.

“...She’s leaving me on my own here, eh. Then I probably shouldn’t rely on the nobility attending the marriage ceremony, either.”

Zenjirou tore his hair out, whereupon the middle-aged waiting maid by his side declared with a soft voice.

“Master Zenjirou, I do believe you are approaching this the right way, but I would

advice you to do some behind-the-scenes negotiations as well. In my humble opinion at least, you should consult with General Puyol to some extent."

Hearing an unexpected name pop up, Zenjirou had a surprised look in the face.

"General Puyol!? Why him of all people? Isn't he the most troublesome person to get involved with?"

As she had expected his reaction, the capable maid explained without breaking her matter-of-fact tone.

"It is precisely for that reason. If he were to intrude himself into the affairs later on, things would become extremely troublesome. So I would suggest to discuss things with him beforehand.

The matter involves a knight from the Navarre Kingdom and Miss Nilda after all. General Puyol is practically her brother-in-law now that he has taken Lady Lucinda as his wife.

He can always play a part in it as her 'family', even if it is pushing it a bit."

"Yeah... You have a point..."

Zenjirou showed an expression as if enduring toothaches and held his head in his hands in reaction to the advice from Ines.

It certainly was stretching it a bit to involve yourself in it as the husband of the elder sister of the person in question, but it was not impossible with a bit of overbearance. And Puyol Guillén was the kind of able man, who could overcome a few difficulties, if it benefited him in the end.

"Instead of being dragged around by that rascal, it certainly would be better to work together with him from the beginning."

The reason he used an usual snidely tone for General Puyol was not only because of jealousy towards a former marriage candidate for Aura.

Frankly speaking, Zenjirou and General Puyol handled cases like this one so differently that you might as well call them polar opposites.

General Puyol prioritized profit in everything he did. Of course he was also considering things in the long term, so he was willing to accept a temporary loss for it, but he never spared any mercy for the feelings of the other party.

In this case for example, Zenjirou was viewing it as the best outcome, when everything would be treated like it never happened once it was exposed that the knight from the Navarre Kingdom was lying.

Of course that took into consideration the fact that Nilda was no nobility, a circumstance that ought to be kept secret, but even without that, Zenjirou would not want an apology that drove the other party into a corner.

Because he knew that the resentment he earned from that would outweigh the little profit it brought, in the future for sure.

In a way, it was the limitation of a salaryman from a peaceful country.

On the other hand, General Puyol would show no mercy in this case.

As long as he could find fault with the other party, he would rigorously attack that weakness to squeeze as much profit as possible from it.

For example: Compensation money. For example: Extradition of the knight in question. For example: Defamation of the country through a formal apology. And so on. With no regard for the pride or feelings of the other party, he would make the most of it. If that earned him resentment as a result, so be it.

And when the resentment got the better of them, he would just have to put them in their place through force, demanding compensation again. Truly killing two birds with one stone. That was his way of doing things.

“It definitely wouldn’t end well. I guess I need to talk to him and ask him take a backseat, if possible.

But can I actually convince him on my own?”

The task was obviously too heavy for him.

When Zenjirou heaved a sigh, Ines practically drove him into a corner with a soothing tone.

"It is something only you can accomplish, Master Zenjirou. However, how about asking Sir Raffaelo from the Marquez Family for help, if it simply proves to be too difficult for you? He is very talented, when it comes to negotiations."

"Hmm... No will do. I can't do that."

For a moment, he was swayed by her suggestion, but in the end, he shook his head.

"Since it concerns Nilda, it is better to involve as few people as possible."

Zenjirou was actually well-disposed towards the sociable Raffaelo Marquez, but Aura had classified him "as dangerous as General Puyol".

He should not rely on him that easily.

Having resisted the temptation to just offload everything on Raffaelo, Zenjirou declared to Ines with a serious expression.

"I will persuade General Puyol by myself. That guy needs to stay out of this until everything is resolved or I won't be able to sleep at night."

I want to have a private talk with him. Can you arrange it?"

"Of course. I shall prepare an unofficial meeting without raising suspicion. Incidentally, Master Zenjirou, what do you intend to do about Marquis Guzzle?"

Her question prompted him to pondered with a complicated look on his face again.

"Marquis Guzzle, eh. A tough call. Hmm, he is Nilda's father and the Lord of this domain, so I shouldn't be acting behind his back, but... the root of the problem is Nilda's status after all."

I can't really talk him into it without mentioning that..."

There was one more problem: When Zenjirou privately talked to him as the Prince Consort and partner for Princess Freya, the undertone of "That is the will of the Prince Consort" would predominate, no matter what.

Which in turn basically amounted to Royalty interfering with the authority of a Feudal Lord.

Considering these circumstances, Zenjirou decided not to inform Marquis Guzzle ahead of things.

“I will not get in touch with Marquis Guzzle. I am scared of acting without consulting the local lord, but the possible consequences of telling him outweigh it.”

“Very well.”

The faithful maid of middle age simply lowered her head courteously in light of the words from the Prince Consort.

# Chapter 5

## Nigh on Conclusion

After the trivial dispute between Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom and Nilda, the second daughter of Marquis Guzzle, had escalated into the current incident, it was finally showing signs of a settlement after all this time now.

Both sides had lead a fruitless discussion for numerous days.

Those involved from the Navarre Kingdom and from the Guzzle Family were meeting up one last time in the spacious room this night, because Marquis Guzzle had announced that he would pass judgment today.

From the point of view of someone living in a modern state under the rule of law, it would be highly questionable to let the relative, or more precisely the father, of the involved party pass judgment, but as the local lord within a feudal state, he was only carrying out his given right.

And as a matter of fact, no one from the Navarre Kingdom was objecting in that regard.

Having said this, they would hardly do the same, when that judgment turned out to be so unfair that they were not okay with it.

While the involved parties were glaring at each other tensely, their ringleaders Marquis Guzzle and General Martín were commuting through eye contact with a stern face that could not fully conceal their perplexity.

(Hey, what is going on here?)

(No clue. You tell me.)

If you were to put it into words, it would sound like that.

Both of them had made arrangement behind the scenes to let their son and subordinate “gain experience” through this incident, but that plan seemed to have fallen through.

Needless to say, Princess Freya was the biggest reason for that.

“.....”

Even now, she was sitting in the centre with an expression that asserted her “leading role” in all of this. The central figure from the Navarre Kingdom, Knight Captain Cris was sitting straight across from her.

Nilda was just fidgeting around on the side and even Xavier, who was supposed to lead the negotiations, was obviously forced into taking a backseat.

For a while now, Xavier was signalizing Zenjirou at the back with his eyes to “do something about her”, but Zenjirou was just sitting there with a smile on his face.

So Xavier came to a realization all too late.

Zenjirou was not oblivious to his silent call for help.

He was ignoring it knowingly.

Xavier finally understood the real meaning behind his words, when Zenjirou had claimed to side with Princess Freya.

Even when Princess Freya was acting somewhat unladylike, Zenjirou was not reprimanding her for it.

In other words, this meeting was sure to be messed up by her.

Although the utterances of a woman lacked significance, it was hard to ignore her, when she was Royalty from a different country and the official partner for Royalty of the own country.

With her presence alone, Princess Freya had already foiled the plan of Marquis Guzzle and General Martín to let Xavier and Knight Captain Cris gain some practical experience.

And the final nail in the coffin was the imposing man sitting in the gallery.

With his new wife Lucinda at his side, General Puyol had crossed his log-thick arms and watched the situation unfold with an obviously amused grin on his face.

Asserting his involvement due to Nilda being his little sister-in-law now, he had requested to attend this meeting.

Although he had promised not to interfere unless the need arises, Marquis Guzzle actually did not trust his words at all.

Puyol Guillén was an ambitious and greedy man with the resolution and capability to make his vision come true.

In light of the intrusion of that troublesome man, Marquis Guzzle had lost all confidence to keep his composure till the end of today.

Going by that, it was probably fortunate that it was night already.

Various oil pans around the room and on the table were burning brightly, dispelling the dark of the night, but even with flattery, the room could only be called "dimly lit" at best.

The reason they met so late at night was because Zenjirou had insisted on a rare occasion that he could not spare time otherwise.

Grateful to the wilfulness of the Prince Consort just this once, Marquis Guzzle took a deep breath to pull himself together without letting anyone notice, speaking up with a loud voice.

"Looks like everyone is here. Then let us have the final hearing.

Both involved parties have taken up a clear position. Now square with your conscience, when you espouse your claim.

Once I have listened to your opinions, I shall assume full responsibility as the Marquis

and pass judgment on this incident.

If anyone wants to object my decision, go through the appropriate channels later on. Got it?"

The "appropriate channels" in this case were the respective Royal Families.

In the case that the Navarre Kingdom Delegation had complaints about the decision from Marquis Guzzle, they would bring up the matter to the Navarre Royal Family, who would then raise an official protest to the Carpa Royal Family, telling them to talk it out with Marquis Guzzle.

At the same time, it would turn the matter into an official diplomatic issue between the two countries.

But it was rather unrealistic that the Navarre Kingdom would raise an official protest to the Major Power Carpa Kingdom just because a mere knight might or might not have entered a restricted area.

On the other hand, Xavier and Nilda belonged to the March of Guzzle, so they had no "appropriate channel" to go through to begin with. Even as his daughter and son, they were not allowed to object the absolute instruction from their Feudal Lord.

Considering all that, it was obvious how much of a nuisance the interference from Princess Freya was.

She was an official guest in the Carpa Kingdom, so she could actually raise a protest through the "appropriate channel", namely the Carpa Royal Family, if she were to disapprove of the decision from Marquis Guzzle.

(How did it turn out like this?)

Marquis Guzzle suppressed his urge to massage his throbbing temple and declared with a low, but clear voice to everyone.

"No objections, I see. Then I shall ask you three some questions in order to validate your claims. Answer with nothing but the truth."

"Yes!"

“Yes, Sir.”

“Very well.”

The illegitimate child, the knight from the other country and the princess from the northern continent consented one after another to the words from the power of authority on this land.

Amidst the illumination from the flames burning on the oil pans, Marquis Guzzle saw all of them nodding their head lightly and called out to his own daughter with a really strict tone first of all like he had intended to.

“Good. Then I will start with Nilda Guzzle.

Please explain it easy to understand what you saw on that night and where.”

Addressed by the father first, the illegitimate child opened her mouth, which was still dry from nervousness.

“Yes, Marquis. On that night, I met a knight, when I turned around the corner of the hallway.”

They were just doing a question and answer session right now, so even though Nilda was not used to this kind of situation, she managed to answer smoothly without stuttering.

“Who was it?”

“It was too dark to confirm it myself, but when I called him to a halt, he named himself as ‘Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom’.”

Upon that reply, Marquis Guzzle turned body and glance alike to Knight Raymundo.

“Knight Raymundo from the Delegation of the Navarre Kingdom, you have heard what Nilda claims. Do you have any objections to what she said?”

The fierce glance of the noble lord had not lost its touch even in his old age, so the young knight swallowed his saliva with a gulp and answered with an enthusiastic loud voice.

"No, Sir Marquis. I was certainly called to a halt by Miss Nilda on that night and gave her my name. This much is certain."

Up to this point, both parties had the same understanding of the situation, so the young knight had no reason to object and simply agreed to it. What followed after was an issue, though.

Marquis Guzzle cleared his throat with an affected cough, then asked his own daughter again.

"It happened at the small cross-shaped intersection, where the three hallways converge. Nilda, which hallway do you say Knight Raymundo came out of at that time?"

"Sir Raymundo came out of the 'central hallway'."

The young knight gave a small jerk to Nilda's resolute claim, but he had enough self-restraint to not speak up without permission here.

"Knight Raymundo, do you have objections to what Nilda claims?"

When he was addressed again, the young knight stood up from his chair and spoke up.

"Yes, I have. I did not come out of the 'central hallway', but the 'outmost hallway'."

Just like it had happened numerous times before, Knight Raymundo was stating something completely different than Nilda right here and now as well.

At this point, no one was surprised about their clashing of opinion anymore. The matter had been dragged out for so long because of it, after all. So his objection was anything but unexpected.

If anything, Marquis Guzzle felt like heaving a sigh, when he was thinking about how

he still had to question “one more person”.

Nevertheless, the elder noble lord kept his strict look on his face and spoke to the third involved person.

“Freya Uppsala, you accompanied Nilda on that day. Do you have anything to add?”

In light of his question, the princess from the northern continent let her blue-tinged silver hair shimmer in the light of the flames and asserted with a determined tone.

“Yes, I only have one thing to say: I saw Sir Raymundo coming out of the ‘central hallway’. That is all.”

Then she glared at Knight Captain Cris sitting across from her, not the actual Knight Raymundo in question.

In the discussions before, Princess Freya seemed to have made Knight Captain Cris her main target.

For Zenjirou, that was only natural.

The attitude Knight Captain Cris took towards Princess Freya was basically the same as towards an “insolent woman”.

Of course he was properly minding his etiquette towards Royalty in his public utterances and behaviour, but his moral values such as “It’s just the delusion of a woman.” and “Why can’t she be more of a woman and quietly listen to the man?” were seeping out here and there.

To the eyes of Zenjirou, it only looked like Knight Captain Cris was assertively trying to pick a fight with her, but unfortunately, Knight Captain Cris himself was not aware of it in the slightest.

If anything, he seemed to be acting like that out of the goodness of his heart in order to calm Princess Freya down and solve things peacefully.

(It's not easy to be a woman in this world.)

Although he knew it was rude, Zenjirou looked at Princess Freya with a mixture of respect and pity.

Because he had been close to Queen Aura, an exception to the exception, so far, Zenjirou had apparently missed out on realizing how difficult it was for women in this world to conduct themselves in public.

While Zenjirou thought about these things, Marquis Guzzle looked at everyone and droned on.

"I have heard your claims. Raise your hand, if you want to add something, justify yourself or ask a question. I will allow you to speak up in order.

Anyone speaking up without permission will be expelled from the room. Keep that in mind."

The three people in question, Nilda, Princess Freya and Knight Raymundo obviously nodded their approval to it, but all the others present did so as well.

Strictly speaking, there was another involved person, namely the bodyguard from Princess Freya: the female warrior Skathi. But she had no right to speak up.

This had nothing to do with her status or gender. It was a more fundamental issue: Her occupation.

As the retainer and bodyguard of Princess Freya, Skathi was practically her girl Friday.

Maybe she did it in private, but it was unlikely she would ever say something to inconvenience her master at an official hearing like this.

So allowing Skathi to express her opinion would effectively be the same as counting only the claim from Princess Freya twice.

Marquis Guzzle had said that he "could not allow one person to raise both arms in a

majority vote" and as expected, Princess Freya had no choice but to accept it.

But on the other hand, Skathi could have acted as a "representative" for Princess Freya, if she were more eloquent than her, and Princess Freya would have to stay silent.

Anyway, you could voice your opinion now as long as you raised your hand first, but for a while, no one did raise their hand.

That was not really surprising, either.

At the moment, both parties were not only having opposing views, they also had no proof whatsoever to weaken the argument of the other.

So whoever spoke up first, might slip up and dig its own grave, ending up with a disadvantage.

There might be exceptions, but hardly any team would choose to bat first, when batting second was actually more advantageous. Having said this, they could not remain silent forever.

Raising his hand amidst the heavy atmosphere of reluctance by the dim light of the oil pans was none other than Knight Captain Cristiano Pinto from the Navarre Kingdom.

"Cristiano Pinto is allowed to speak."

With these words from Marquis Guzzle, Knight Captain Cris stood up smoothly from his chair and opened his mouth.

"Then with your permission, I would like to ask Miss Nilda a question. You seem to have run into Knight Raymundo at the corner on said night, but do you remember what kind of shoes he had been wearing back then?"

"Eh? Shoes?"

Nilda raised a dumbfounded voice in reaction to the unexpected question.

“Do not speak without permission, Nilda Guzzle. Please answer the question of Cristiano Pinto now.”

Reprimanded by her father Marquis Guzzle, Nilda stood up bewildered, surprised and ashamed alike. She recalled the situation and answered.

“Ehm... I did not pay attention to his shoes.”

“Is that so. Well, you coincidentally met at night, so I guess that is to be expected. Truth be told, Raymundo was wearing the same leather shoes for knight as right now.

Sir Marquis, do I have your permission to let Raymundo showcase his shoes?”

“Granted.”

“Thank you very much. Raymundo, stand up.”

With the permission from Marquis Guzzle, Knight Captain Cris ordered his subordinate Knight Raymundo to stand up.

“Yes, Sir!”

Upon the order from the young captain, the even younger Knight Raymundo stood up with a jerk.

When the solid leather boots hit the stony ground, a thud sound resonated through the room.

Knight Captain Cris revealed a faint smile.

“As you could hear, the shoes for knights have a firm sole and make a loud sound, when you walk on stony ground. It is not as loud in a wide room as this one, but in a small hallway with stone walls on both sides it is resounding quite a lot. Raymundo, take a step.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Prompted by Knight Captain Cris, Knight Raymundo started to walk on the spot with thuds.

The young knight continued to step on the ground in the dim light of the flames from the oil pans.

And Nobility and Royalty watched over him without saying anything.

It was a rather ridiculous scene, but no one was laughing.

“Miss Nilda, you should have heard these footsteps in the hallway. At what point did you became aware of them?”

“Well, that is... I was talking to Princess Freya while walking, so I only noticed the footsteps once I saw a silhouette.”

When the honest Nilda answered truthfully, Knight Captain Cris showed a triumphant smile on his face for a moment, whereas Princess Freya looked like she had swallowed something bitter.

“Is that so? In other words, you were so immersed in your conversation that you ‘did not even notice these loud footsteps’”

“Aw...”

All too late, Nilda realized what Knight Captain Cris was getting at, too, and went pale in the face.

The crux of the matter was whether Knight Raymundo came out of the central hallway or out of the outmost hallway.

Nilda and Princess Freya were claiming that he came out of the central hallway while Raymundo himself insisted that he came out of the outmost hallway.

Needless to say, Raymundo would be a liar, if Nilda and Princess Freya were saying the truth, and if Raymundo was saying the truth, Nilda and Princess Freya would have “made a mistake”.

And right now, Knight Captain Cris had tickled a testimony out of Nilda that “she was

too immersed in her conversation on the go that she did not hear the loud footsteps".

In other words, it was a new piece of information that lent credibility to the claim of the Navarre Kingdom that Nilda and Princess Freya had seen wrong.

If they were so engrossed in conversation that they did not even notice such loud footsteps, then it stood to reason that they also did not notice him coming out of the outmost hallway and mistook it for the central hallway.

The line of argument was a bit highhanded, but convincing nevertheless.

Xavier realized that the balance had tipped in their favour, even if just a bit, and raised his hand in haste.

"Marquis, please allow me to speak!"

"Okay, you may speak, Xavier Guzzle."

Receiving the permission from his father Marquis Guzzle, Xavier stood up with an expression so enthusiastic it was recognizable even in the dim light of the flames.

"I have a question for Sir Raymundo. You did not only meet Nilda and Princess Freya on that night, but also Lady Skathi, who accompanied them as the bodyguard for the princess.

Nilda and Princess Freya were wearing shoes with soft soles, but Lady Skathi was wearing the same kind of shoes as you, Sir Raymundo. Were you able to hear her footsteps?"

The argument desperately put forward by Xavier was extremely simple.

If Raymundo had not noticed the footsteps of Skathi, just like Nilda had not noticed his, then it was only usual not to hear them, making it invalid as an argument.

Xavier was trying to shift reasoning like that.

But his argumentation had a flaw.

The young knight from the Navarre Kingdom answered the question baffled.

"No, I did not hear them. Because, like I just mentioned, Miss Nilda and Princess Freya were approaching me while making conversation. Their voices must have cancelled out the sound of the footsteps.

I did hear their voices, of course."

"Ah..."

Xavier was at a loss for words due to the all too obvious clarification.

On second thought, it was only natural. No matter how loud the footsteps might be, they would still be quieter than speaking voices.

Raymundo had noticed their approach not from the footsteps, but from their voices and because they had been talking so vividly, Raymundo had not heard the footsteps.

Xavier had accidentally proved that Raymundo have had a better understanding of the surroundings than the women on that night.

"...Grr"

Flushing his lightly tanned face bright red, Xavier was rendered speechless. Watching him from behind, Zenjirou realized it was about time to leave the backseat.

(Man, I was kind of hoping the situation would be closer to a decision before I act, but things look bad, if I remain silent at this rate. It'll be quite a gamble, but I've got no other choice.)

Making up his mind with a deep breath, Zenjirou slowly raised his right hand.

"Marquis Guzzle, I wish to speak up."

Although his voice was not all that loud, everyone present looked to be quite taken aback by it.

That goes without saying.

Up until now, Zenjirou had given “free rein” to Princess Freya and maintained the attitude that this got nothing to do with him.

He himself might not be an authoritarian character, but his title as the Prince Consort was by no means to be taken lightly.

“...You are allowed to speak, Zenjirou Carpa.”

While Marquis Guzzle gave him permission, his expression revealed a tint of wariness as well.

Feeling an uncomfortable itch on his back from all the gazes on him, Zenjirou stood up on the spot.

“I have a question for Knight Captain Cristiano from the Navarre Kingdom. You have been discussing the audibility or inaudibility of the footsteps for a while now, but is it even that important to begin with?”

Maybe he did not expect to be asked first, but Knight Captain Cris showed a blank expression for a moment before showing his confident smile once again and answering the question.

“Well, I would not call it all that important, but it certainly is decisive in this case.

You may not know this as a non-combatant, but a warrior spends as much time refining his senses of hearing and seeing at night as he trains with weapons.

Pointing out the different capabilities of someone with such training and someone with no such training, helps a great deal in understanding this situation.”

His careful and thorough explanation was steeped in disdain for the non-militant man called Zenjirou.

As a matter of fact, Princess Freya had keenly spotted the contempt and was narrowing her eyes to slits angrily. Even General Martín, sitting in the back, was heaving a small troubled sigh.

But the person in question, Zenjirou paid no attention to the attitude of the young knight captain and continued his questioning.

"I see now. Then the reason I did not see him, nor hear his footsteps in the 'outmost hallway' on that night must be my lack of these capabilities. Am I right in thinking that, Sir Cristiano?"

This question certainly caused a big surprise.

While Knight Captain Cris uttered a dumbfounded "Huh?", Zenjirou explained the circumstances with a serious look.

"Truth be told, I arrived at the scene a bit later on that night as well. Through the 'outmost passage', that is. When I got to the crossroad point, Princess Freya and the other two were still standing there, so I assume not much time had passed since Sir Raymundo left the place.

So while I was passing through the 'outmost hallway', Sir Raymundo must have walked ahead of me. Yet I did not see him there, nor did I hear any footsteps. Oh, and I was not talking with anyone and kept quiet the whole time. Just saying."

The incriminating claim from Zenjirou prompted Knight Raymundo to break out in a cold sweat and look flustered.

Seeing his subordinate panic like that, Knight Captain Cris positioned himself protective in front of him and replied with a smile.

"Forgive me for saying this, but this seems to be indeed an issue of your capabilities, Your Majesty.

I may be speaking out of turn, but it does not look like you have received any training as a soldiers whatsoever.

In that case, it only appears to be inevitable that you did not notice Raymundo, when he was walking quite a bit ahead of you."

Knight Captain Cris somewhat talked down Zenjirou for not being a soldier, but Zenjirou kept his composure and nodded a few times.

"Yes, that makes sense. But what about the other way round?

As you have mentioned, I am no soldier. My eyesight at night, my sense of hearing and above all, my handling of weapons is literally on par with a woman or child. Hence I

am always taking Knight Natalio with me wherever I go.

He, too, is wearing the same shoes for knights. Needless to say, they should have made the same loud noise. Now then, Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom:

Did you hear such footsteps behind you, when you were walking down the ‘outmost passage’ on that night?”

“Well...”

It looked like the sweating Knight Raymundo was one-sidedly driven into a corner as he was struggling for words, but this was actually quite a challenge for Zenjirou as well.

Unless Raymundo told a lie now just like Zenjirou wanted him to, Zenjirou would not be able to spring the “trap” he had thought of.

So nervous that he was afraid that the others could hear his heart beating fast, Knight Raymundo seemed to make up his mind and opened his mouth.

“Now that you mentioned it, I remember that on my way, I turned around once, because I thought I had heard footsteps. But I believed it to be the echo of my own footsteps, so I paid it no mind afterwards.”

With these words, the young knight nodded his head confidently.

Zenjirou became so euphoric that he wanted to scream “Gotcha!”.

Noticing the elated Zenjirou, Knight Captain Cris jumped to his feet and advocated for Knight Raymundo as the superior officer.

“Your Majesty Zenjirou, the footsteps indeed echo well in a hallway with stone walls, just like Raymundo said. It is by no means uncommon that even a trained soldier may mistake the footsteps from someone afar as the echo of his own.”

He might have heard footsteps, or he might have not.

The testimony was rather vague, but that was to be expected. Knight Captain Cris had intended to support his subordinate, but as far as Zenjirou was concerned, that advocacy had been absolutely meaningless.

For him, it was not important whether the footsteps were heard or not. The following “I turned around once” utterance had sealed the deal.

The trap had already sprung and perfectly caught its prey. All that was left was to reel it in carefully.

Zenjirou showed an extremely composed smile and slowly began to elaborate.

“Sir Raymundo, Knight Captain Cris. You were right, when you said I had no training whatsoever as a soldier, so I have no military abilities to speak of.

I agree that it is no wonder that I did not see a silhouette in front of me, nor heard any footsteps. But my trusted bodyguard, Knight Natalio, has not perceived any of it, either.”

After having remained silent so far, Marquis Guzzle had to speak up now, as the presiding judge so to say.

“Zenjirou Carpa, the testimony from a bodyguard or subordinate will not be acknowledged here.”

It was the same reason why Skathi was not allowed to speak up as the bodyguard for Princess Freya.

The important thing for a bodyguard, who had sworn loyalty to a master, was agreeing with his master, not the truth of the matter. Hence the testimony from a bodyguard or subordinate was generally ignored, because he would only agree with the opinion of the master anyway.

Zenjirou had brought up the name of his bodyguard despite that, because he had wanted to emphasise how much they were talking at cross purposes.

“Your Majesty Zenjirou, the hallway in question is extremely long and it was rather dark already. So it is not strange at all that neither you, nor your knight took notice of Raymundo walking quite a bit ahead of you.

Raymundo himself seems to have barely picked it up and even wrote it off as the echo of his own footsteps, so I assume that there must have been quite the distance between you.”

Hence there were not contradicting each other. Or so Knight Captain Cris claimed. Zenjirou nodded a bit affected.

“I see. That certainly sounds plausible. But I am still doubtful. Sir Raymundo had been trained as a soldier, so how did he not notice that I was walking behind him?”

“Like I said, he did notice, but he waved it off as his imagination...”

With a slightly annoyed look, Knight Captain Cris repeated what he had mentioned earlier, but Zenjirou cut him short and continued himself.

“I have not received training as a soldier. I see as much as a child or woman at night. And I am afraid that my courage is on the same level as a child or woman, too.

So once it gets dark, I ‘cannot go outside without light’.”

“...!?”

In light of these words, Knight Captain Cris went pale in the face for the first time tonight.

Certain that his intentions had gotten across, Zenjirou allowed himself to show a broad grin and took out his favourite “hand-cranked LED flashlight” from his pocket.

To maximize the effect, he had purposefully insisted to have this meeting at night.

“This is something I brought along from my home country. I will spare you of the technical details. In short, it is like a magic tool for illumination.

On the night in question, I was walking while using this.”

After saying this, Zenjirou turned on the switch of the LED flashlight. Needless to say,

he had charged it plenty in advance by cranking the handle.

“Guh!?”

“Uh...!”

“Wha!?”

“This...?”

The white light of the LED was so bright it did not even compare to the flames on the oil pans, so everyone present squinted their eyes in surprise.

“Well then, Sir Raymundo. You said earlier that you thought you had heard footsteps and ‘turned around once’, right?

I will ask you the same question again now: How did you not notice that I was walking behind you?”

At the same time, Zenjirou deliberately bathed the young knight from the Navarre Kingdom in the light of the LED flashlight.

The artificial white light cleared away the night and revealed the pale face, trembling lips and sweating forehead of the young knight for everyone to see.

“Ah... I, I...”

Seeing the young knight flustered like that, Zenjirou immediately felt the euphoria that had ran through his whole body earlier, subdue.

(I ended up backing him into a corner with no way out at an official meeting.)

That was not how Zenjirou had actually wanted to resolve the situation, because the loser was quick to hold a grudge, when you embarrassed him at such an official occasion.

But that had been the only way for him, if he wanted to wrap it up as a victory for their side this time.

(Raffaelo Márquez would have surely been able to end this more smoothly. And I doubt General Puyol would have given a damn about grudges or anything. He would squeeze the most profit with all his might.)

Although he knew it was pointless, he ended up comparing himself to more capable people.

Glancing over to General Puyol, who was showing a faint smile in the back, for a moment, Zenjirou somehow shook that thought off and gave the final push to end this incident once and for all.

“Can someone actually fail to notice such a light behind him in a straight hallway? Especially, if he ‘turned around once’ at some point.

I am repeating myself here, but I am no soldier. My eyesight at night is worse than a child or woman. But even then, I would definitely notice it, when such a bright light illuminates the straight path behind me, no matter how far away.

Now then, Sir Raymundo, can you please explain it satisfactorily to us how you, a trained soldier, failed to notice a light even someone like me would have noticed?”

Backed into a corner with nowhere to run. A question without a viable answer. And a bright light not allowing oneself to hide in the dark of the night.

“.....”

Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom seemed to have realized that it was impossible to talk his way out of this, seeing as he broke down on his chair defeated.



The rest would be extremely simple.

Now that Knight Raymundo had broken down, it would be smooth sailing once he admitted that the root of the problem had been his lie and that he had actually came out of the central hallway.

"Then you admit to having made a false testimony, Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom?"

".....Yes."

The young knight from the Navarre Kingdom replied affirmative with a weak voice to Marquis Guzzle while sinking into his chair.

"Hmm, what to do..."

With a resolution to the issue on the table now, Marquis Guzzle wrinkled his brow and pondered.

Who was right? Who was wrong?

The conclusion had practically arrived already, but the problem on how to punish the mistaken party remained.

It was a difficult decision.

To begin with, Knight Raymundo had committed an illegal trespassing into a restricted area.

Although it sounded like a grave offense, even Marquis Guzzle was actually considering the place to be easily mistaken, so it would not be strange, when someone stepped into there by mistake. Moreover, the area was not really important enough to cause harm, when someone actually got there.

Hence a simple "verbal rebuke" would be more than adequate for an offense like this one.

But some people would not accept that, now that things had escalated this far.

Marquis Guzzle glanced at the forerunner of "these people" and checked their fierce

expression.

As expected, the young girl with her characteristic blue-tinged silver hair was showing an aggressive smile as if saying “Yeah, what are you going to do about this?” while glaring at the Knight Captain and young knight from the Navarre Kingdom.

It was unthinkable that the northern princess would be content with just a “verbal rebuke”.

But then again, the Navarre Kingdom would already be shamed a great deal just because of a mere misstep.

If there was some kind of punishment on top of that, they would surely hold a grudge, even if they knew it was misplaced.

The concerned Knight Raymundo was still in a state of lethargy, but his advocate Knight Captain Cris was biting down on his lip and suppressing the humiliation. He probably thought that “he had been taken for a fool”.

Hopefully this did not leave behind any unnecessary trouble. Marquis Guzzle feared as such, but when he looked at General Martín sitting at the back, the giant general was closing his eyes for a moment and slightly shook his bearish head to the side.

(It's okay. I'll take care of it later.)

Perceiving the intentions of General Martín through this small gesture, Marquis Guzzle heaved a sigh of relief.

Known for his excellent control over his subordinate, General Martín was going to take responsibility for the aftermath, so half of the problem was already solved.

A heavy weight off his shoulders, the elder feudal lord looked then at the male Royalty, who had brought about this conclusion.

“Then I shall announce the verdict. Do you have anything else to say before that, Master Zenjirou?”

He was now addressing Zenjirou politely with the title of “Master”. It was clearly different from how he had addressed him during the “trial”.

In other words, he was going to announce the verdict, but was trying to show some “consideration” for the royal Zenjirou before that.

Discerning that, Zenjirou frantically searched for the right words in order to bring across his endeavour as smoothly as possible.

“...Well, I believe that we had to sit down like this, because some things ended up confounding the situation unnecessarily.

So as long as the Navarre Kingdom admits their wrongdoing in this case, I wish for nothing further. To begin with, I cannot understand why it escalated like this. In my opinion, it was a trivial misunderstanding we could have get on without.”

To translate his words: “Sorry that Princess Freya messed up things recklessly. I’m okay with a verbal apology from the Navarre Kingdom. If anything, can we pretend all of this never happened to begin with?”

Since it was not phrased all that ambiguous, even Marquis Guzzle with his bare minimum of eloquence for a noble, understood what he wanted to say.

The elder noble let his frowned face blossom into a smile for a moment, but immediately cleared his throat with a cough to gloss over it.

“O- Okay. I certainly have heard you out.

Then I, the Lord of the March of Guzzle, shall announce the verdict for this case.”

In reaction to his words, everyone present cast down their eyes and solemnly held their peace. The same applied to Zenjirou.

The Marquis was still the man with the highest authority on this land. A Feudal Lord did not have the authority to judge Royalty, but on the other hand, even Royalty could not go against the decision of the Feudal Lord made within his own territory.

Marquis Guzzle had tapped the full potential, when he had “asked and considered a word of advice” from Zenjirou earlier.

“There are two issues at hand. First, Knight Raymundo from the Navarre Kingdom ‘stumbled’ into a restricted area of our house. Second, he tried to obfuscate it with a lie, when that fact was pointed out.

Trespassing into the restricted area by itself is not such a serious matter. We are partly to blame for it, since we did not put up any signs or guards there.

But I cannot overlook the fact that he forcefully tried to disguise the truth as the ‘mistake’ of another.

I hereby sentence the involved party from the delegation of the Navarre Kingdom to admit their mistake and apologize for it.”

“...Understood.”

Knight Captain Cristiano Pinto from the Navarre Kingdom answered with a stiff voice, his earlier undaunted expression now frozen inexpressively.

It was an extremely irksome result for him, but he realized how foolish it would be to still go against the decision of the marquis.

Marquis Guzzle nodded briefly to the answer from Knight Captain Cris.

“Good. Then this case is now closed. No one would benefit from discussing this any further.

The guilty party will admit their mistake and apologize, whereas the other party will accept said apology. This will be the end of it. I would like to suggest we no longer speak of this matter anywhere, but what do you all say?”

He suggested with a probing tone.

The reason it was a “suggestion” in the end was because that part alone exceeded his authority as a Feudal Lord.

The Feudal Lord carried responsibility for everything that happened within his domain, but this time it involved people of another country and even Royalty of the

own country.

As foreigners, the delegation from the Navarre Kingdom could “appeal” by turning the matter into a diplomatic issue through their Royal Family, and as Royalty himself, Zenjirou could enter an “objection” right away as long as he had the permission from Queen Aura.

Needless to say, Marquis Guzzle would still be responsible for the revision, whether it was an “appeal” or an “objection”, so it would not turn out all that different, but it would complicate things for sure.

Fortunately enough, Knight Captain Cris agreed to the suggestion from Marquis Guzzle right away.

“Understood. I do not have any objections to keep this matter to ourselves.”

His excessive pride had caused him to become emotional, but even under the influence of emotions, Knight Captain Cris was apparently not the type to make irrational decisions.

To begin with, this issue had brought discredit on the knight of the Navarre Kingdom. If they could sweep it all under the carpet, it was more than the Navarre Kingdom could ask for.

On this occasion, Zenjirou expressed his consent as well.

“Certainly. I have no objections, either. In favour of the friendly contact between our countries, I believe it is in our best interest to forget that this ever happened. What do you say, Princess Freya?”

“...If you say so, Your Majesty Zenjirou.”

The silver-haired princess kept her fierce glare fixated on Knight Captain Cris while she uttered her approval with an affectedly monotone voice.

It was obvious at a glance that her dissatisfied attitude was meant to convey: “I

actually do not want to reconcile with you, but His Majesty Zenjirou told me to, so I am making peace."

Everyone present must have thought that Zenjirou had put Princess Freya in her place.

Grinding her teeth unladylike, the woman reluctantly obeyed the words of the man without concealing her dissatisfaction.

Princess Freya was giving the impression that she was complying with the man known as Zenjirou from the bottom of her heart, and not just as his partner for the marriage ceremony.

Zenjirou was quite annoyed by that performance, but Marquis Guzzle actually gave him a respectful look for it.

"Then I declare the meeting closed now."

When the Feudal Lord declared the end of the meeting, you could practically see the tension from this troublesome issue melt away from him.

"Princess Freya, Miss Nilda, I apologize for my shortcoming in this case."

Meanwhile, Knight Raymundo from the delegation of the Navarre Kingdom lowered his head deeply in front of the two girls.

In light of the haggard bow from the young knight, the open-hearted Nilda forgot all about their earlier dispute, displaying sympathy and compassion on her face.

"All is well as long as you are careful not to repeat such a behaviour from now on."

But even with her superficial and makeshift education as a noble, Nilda realized that she had to act her part here, so she left her response at that.

On the other hand, the "open-hearted" Princess Freya still remembered the dispute and went into raptures over a feeling of accomplishment and superiority.

"I shall put my faith in you that you will not act like this anymore."

But with an education befitting for a lady, she understood it that it would be bad for diplomacy, if she were to make him prostrate before her, so she left her response at that.

“I will excuse myself now.”

When his apology was accepted a lot easier than he had thought, Knight Raymundo could not help but show a look of relief and tried to leave.

However, he was called to a halt before that.

“Wait. I believe we are not done here yet.”

The voice belonged to the person, who had watched the scene unfold next to Princess Freya: Zenjirou.

Not only the delegation from the Navarre Kingdom was surprised, when the unexpected utterance stopped them from leaving, but also Princess Freya and Nilda widened her eyes in surprise.

“I recall that Marquis Guzzle sentenced ‘the involved party from the delegation of the Navarre Kingdom to admit their mistake and apologize for it’.

Sir Raymundo had been telling the lie, so his apology alone might be enough for all intents and purposes, but Sir Cristiano actually involved himself in the negotiations in accordance with a false impression.

Sir Cristiano, you do not need to apology, but you need to admit right here and now that you assumed incorrectly.

Namely: Princess Freya has an eyesight as good as a soldier at night, and she is not the squeamish type to make a mistake in fear of the darkness.”

“!?”

Not having expected to be the targeted here, Knight Captain Cris showed an

expression as if he had been punched from the side all of a sudden.

Seeing that, Zenjirou thought to himself “Did I do something unnecessary?” with a bit of regret, but it absolutely had to be done from his point of view.

It was not a matter for the benefit of the Carpa Kingdom, but more of a personal matter of sincerity towards Princess Freya.

Princess Freya had been in the hot seat for this incident and thus suffered a “loss” in her evaluation as a woman by the standards of the South Continent.

Needless to say, she had done that, because Zenjirou had asked her to. And without even being told why he wanted her to stand in the political breach, at that. (Zenjirou was not absolutely sure yet, if his assumption about Nilda being no nobility was right or wrong, so he could by no means let that information leak.)

In other words, Zenjirou thought that “she had unilaterally drawn the short straw, obeying his will without knowing the circumstances behind it”.

As the typical Japanese, Zenjirou represented the moral values of being anxious to repay a favour as soon as possible, so he automatically tended to cower before people, whom he owned a favour.

Having said all this, Knight Captain Cris had nothing to do with these thoughts of his.

From his point of view, it only sounded like “he was singled out as well after he had to endure the shame of being unable to protect his subordinate”.

And by the “non-combatant” man he had looked down on, at that.

Annoyance, displeasure, anger and defeat. These bottled-up negative feelings crossed into dangerous territory as Knight Captain Cris automatically reached out for his waist with his right hand. At the same time, he took half a step backwards... stepping into a shallow “puddle” with splashing noise.

“?”

Shot up by the boots, the water drops wetted his ankle.

Why was there a puddle in a place like this? Before he could even wonder about that, Knight Captain Cris was brought back to reason by the coldness of the water.

He perfectly understood that he was about to draw his sword on the spur of the moment, when Royalty of a Major Power had expected the enforcement of a decision from the Feudal Lord of a Major power.

(What the heck am I doing!)

With his head cooled down in an instant, Knight Captain Cris felt a flood of cold sweat running down his back in the next moment.

Although he had attempted to draw his sword, he fortunately had not moved all that much and only for a second, at that. Hardly anyone seemed to have noticed it. Good thing the light from the oil pans kept the surroundings in semi-darkness.

“You are right. I should correct myself.

I made a mistake. Princess Freya, you certainly have an eyesight on par with a soldier at night along with the courage to not let it cloud your judgment. It was wrong of me to assume that you are an ordinary woman.”

He talked quickly in order to gloss over his earlier blunder and admitted his own mistake like Zenjirou had wanted.

The best his pride allowed him to do was to admit his mistake, but not to directly apologize for it.

It was surely on purpose that he threw out his chest and up his chin, when he bended over and lowered his head, as it reinforced its apologetic and self-critical impression.

To Zenjirou, it just seemed ridiculous.

(This looks like a parent apologizing to his child against his will after getting rebuked by a teacher.)

While Zenjirou harboured an impression that would make Knight Captain Cris throw a fit, if he were to hear it, Princess Freya showed a triumphant smile as she answered.

“I am glad you understand, Sir Cristiano.”

If Knight Captain Cris just had left now without saying anything, it might have put an end to things peacefully.

But he probably thought that leaving right after his concession would look like he was “running away”, or else he just could not suppress the urge to say something in return. Either way, Knight Captain Cris stayed where he was and started talking to Zenjirou with an affected laugh.

“Reminds me, Her Majesty Aura seems to be a brave person, who achieved various deeds during the previous war. Not that I had the honour to see her yet, though.”

“Indeed. I have not seen it myself, either, but I have heard of the same.”

Once the main objective was cleared, Zenjirou was not really holding anything against him, and he engaged in some small talk with the young knight, albeit not all that enthusiastic.

“Her Majesty Aura and Princess Freya are both extremely charming women, but also have an unexpected valiant side to them for a female. I guess it is true then that people are attracted to those who ‘possess what they themselves lack’?”

Needless to say, it was biting sarcasm making digs at Zenjirou for not being a soldier.

At his side, Princess Freya wiped the smile off her face and revealed her anger, whereas Zenjirou actually burst out in laughter and responded to the younger knight captain from the foreign country.

“Hahaha. Might be. But attraction cannot be explained so easily. Assuming it could, what kind of woman would you be attracted to then, Sir Cristiano?”

“Eh... I...”

Knight Captain Cris was at a loss for words in light of the counter question.

The captain was good-looking, well-versed in martial arts, quick on the uptake, healthy and had a prideful spirit. On top of that, he was even born into a distinguished family that inherited the blood of the Royal Family.

Going hand in hand with these strong points was a big ego.

Endowed like that, Knight Captain was obviously at a loss for an answer, when asked what kind of woman he preferred on the supposition that people were attracted to those who “possessed what they themselves lacked”.

If he said “beautiful woman”, it would mean he himself was ugly, whereas the “smart woman” answer would make him out to be stupid. And mentioning a “good-hearted woman” would equate to admitting that his own personality was twisted.

At the same time, it was hard to say that he preferred women without such virtues, too.

Zenjirou had only asked it for some casual chit-chat, but pressed for an answer, Knight Captain Cris felt like one had been pulled over him again, all on his own.

His stubbornness to not accept defeat here was probably his biggest weakness.

The young knight could not stand being on the losing side all the time, so he replied even more snarky while keeping up his fake smile.

“You do have a point, Your Majesty Zenjirou. It was imprudent of me. Being attracted to those who possess what you yourself lack might only apply to a few people who lack a very certain quality.”

Even Zenjirou grimaced a bit in reaction to these words.

Of course it was not out of anger from having hit his bullseye.

(Oh god, he’s taking it that far right here?)

He was bewildered and surprised.

It goes without saying that Zenjirou was Royalty of the major power known as Carpa Kingdom and not just any Royalty, but rather the exalted Prince Consort of Queen Aura.

Although he was the eldest son of a distinguished family with blood relations to the Royal Family, the knight captain from the middle power known as Navarre Kingdom was ranked quite a bit lower on the social ladder.

Maybe it was time to reprimand him a bit?

Zenjirou started to consider that, but unfortunately, it was a bit too late for that.

“Knight Captain Cristiano Pinto from the Navarre Kingdom. What did you just say? Who do you think you are talking to?”

Someone else questioned him with a stern voice before Zenjirou. It was the Hero of the Carpa Kingdom: General Puyol Guillén.

“General Puyol?”

When Zenjirou uttered surprised, the giant general bowed to him subservient and turned to Knight Captain Cris with an aura of anger all around him.

“Up until now, I may have let some remarks slide, but that was only because Marquis Guzzle was holding the trial. That is no longer the case.”

Zenjirou immediately understood that the words from General Puyol, uttered in a low, but loud voice, were actually directed at him, even if his broad back was turned to him.

(Oh fuck! He got me!)

Doing his utmost to keep his expression in check, Zenjirou metaphorically clenched his teeth in the head.

He had done secret negotiations with General Puyol in advance to prevent this from happening.

As a result, Zenjirou had somehow managed to make General Puyol accept his request to “stay out of this case”.

Thanks to that, General Puyol had remained silent the whole time during the trial, but right now, the “case had been closed” and they were chit-chatting, so the “promise” from the negotiations was no longer valid.

(Oh god! Stupid Cris! Stupid Puyol! And I’m the most stupid of all!)

While Zenjirou wailed over his own carelessness, General Puyol besieged the young knight captain at once.

“Cristiano Pinto, you seem to have forgotten it, but Master Zenjirou here is Royalty of our country. And he is the exalted husband of Her Majesty Queen Aura, at that. So what did you just say to him? Repeat it to me once more.”

Beleaguered like that, Knight Captain Cris immediately lost all the colour in his face. Even amidst the semi-darkness, you could see it all too well.

So far, he had run his mouth with sarcasm and quips, but it had not become a problem at all, precisely because the other party had not made a big deal out of it. Knight Captain Cris was reminded of that fact all too late.

“My apologies! I spoke out of turn!”

He lowered his head with a snap.

The room fell silent and all the attention was focussed on him.

(Seriously, this is bad. I need to put an end to it somehow.)

Zenjirou panicked as the situation had escalated all at once, but right now, General Puyol was only scolding a foreigner in order to protect the dignity of the Prince Consort.

If he were to stop the general at this point, it would be “self-defeating” instead.

(I definitely can’t stop him, when he’s acting for my sake. Wait, that’s surely part of his plan. Damn it!)

It seemed paranoid, but Zenjirou knew Puyol Guillén all too well to write it off as just that.

He could not take action. In the meantime, General Puyol thrust himself onto Knight Captain Cris.

“I said nothing about apologizing. I told you to repeat yourself. Come on, say it. You already said it directly to Royalty, so you should be able to say it to me, his subject, too.”

“...My deepest apologies.”

It only looked like irrelevant bullying, but there was actually a meaning behind it.

“Again, do not apologize just like that. If you want to apologize, first you have to admit what you did wrong and to whom. After that, you can apologize.”

Knight Captain Cris tried to ride it out with his head lowered humbly, but General Puyol showed no mercy at all. He insisted that the captain admitted from his own mouth to what faux pas he had committed and to whom.

Of course, Knight Captain Cris realized he would betray a decisive weakness, if he were to admit that, so he desperately kept apologizing, nothing else.

“My apologizes. It was imprudent of me. Please forgive me.”

Unexpectedly put on the spot, Knight Captain Cris was obviously supported by his highest superior from the delegation of the Navarre Kingdom: General Martín Nadal.

“Your Majesty Zenjirou, my subordinate has spoken out of line. I apologize on his behalf.”

With these words, General Martín bended his bear-like giant body over, lowering his head deeply in front of Zenjirou.

“G- General...!”

Seeing the well-respected hero of his own country bow like that, Knight Captain Cris was at a loss for words.

General Martín was a peerless hero in the Navarre Kingdom. He had admittedly the same rank as General Puyol, but was enjoying more trust in his own country as compared to General Puyol.

The major power Carpa Kingdom had Marquis Ralah, a lord rivalling General Puyol, and numerous other suitable qualified lords like Marquis Guzzle.

In terms of both competence and international renownedness, General Martín was an outstanding figure in the Navarre Kingdom. In a way, he might even be more prominent than the current King of the Navarre Kingdom.

And such an important pillar of his home country was deeply lowering his head for the captain in order to smooth over the differences of his faux pas.

“.....”

Cristiano Pinto finally grasped the gravity of his mistake now.

“My sincere apologizes, Your Majesty Zenjirou!”

He once again lowered his head, this time even lower than his respected general.

His now exasperated attitude no longer showed any sign of the earlier arrogance towards Zenjirou.

Just through their title, Royalty from a major power were a formidable adversary one should not look down on, even if they had no martial talent or a timid personality. The young knight was made painfully aware of that fact.

On the other hand, Zenjirou appreciated this occasion, since he wanted to conclude this as peacefully as possible.

The man in question and his superior had both lowered their heads. Of course Zenjirou would not let this opportunity slip and spoke up at once.

“Excuse the question, but could it be that it is Sir Cristiano’s first appearance on the international scene?”

"Yes, that is correct."

Sensing that Zenjirou was offering him a lifeline, General Martín affirmed his question respectfully.

He was, of course, telling the truth. Not even twenty yet, Cristiano Pinto was on his first official duty out of the country.

Hearing the response from General Martín, Zenjirou shrugged his shoulders exaggeratedly and heaved a sigh.

"Well, that explains it. Sir Cristiano, the culture, common sense and mindset of people drastically change once you cross a border. I am sure you realized it through this incident?"

Zenjirou had never set a foot outside of Japan back then, nor the Carpa Kingdom now, so it was preposterous for him to be saying that, but that did not matter right now. What mattered was to find an "excuse to forgive" Knight Captain Cris for his mistake.

"Yes, I learned it the hard way."

Oblivious to Zenjirou's circumstances of life, Knight Captain Cris answered afflicted with his head still lowered.

Then Zenjirou shifted his gaze towards the bowing General Martín besides him.

"General Martín, everyone makes mistakes in their youths. And it is the duty of seniors and veterans to teach and guide these youngsters. Am I right?"

"Absolutely, Your Majesty. This is another negligence on my part."

"Yes."

Zenjirou nodded satisfied.

As his superior, General Martín was responsible for any mistakes Knight Captain Cris may commit. It would not be all that strange to accept the apology and bow from General Martín, a renowned hero from another country, as atonement.

General Puyol might feel discontent about this, since he prioritized practical benefits,

but the achievement of making the Hero of the Navarre Kingdom, General Martín, lower his head in front of Royalty from the Carpa Kingdom was not trivial, either.

At the very least, it enhanced the “prestige” of Zenjirou, a fledgling Royalty, greatly.

But before Zenjirou could “close the case”, the insatiable wolf aka. General Puyol interjected with a bright voice, quite different from before.

“Oh, that reminds me, Sir Cristiano is the eldest son of the Pinto Family. I guess it comes to no surprise that no one in the Navarre Kingdom would dare to strictly scold the talented eldest son of a famous family.

Considering that, I might have been a bit too mean in my scolding earlier.”

His mild-mannered speech might as well be called flattering already. Zenjirou and General Martín immediately had a bad premonition, but Knight Captain Cris did not know General Puyol all that well, so he readily jumped at the honeyed avenue of escape.

“Yes, Sir. As shameful as it is, I let my immaturity get the better of me.”

When the knight in question affirmed his words, General Puyol flashed his jet-black eyes.

“Then how about coming to our country? You are still young and I am sure it will come in handy for your future, when you learn from contact with higher-ranking people of another country.”

General Puyol seemed to suggest this out of the goodness of his heart, but no matter how you look at it, he would be nothing but a “hostage” in reality.

Confronted with a sudden “arrest” by the neighbouring major power, the young knight captain ceased all thinking for a while.

Still lowering his head next to him, General Martín now raised his head and glared at the neighbour general with sweat on his forehead.

"That will not be necessary, General Puyol. To begin with, he is still green as a soldier. Of course it is important to take part in negotiations and social intercourse, but prioritizing that at the cost of his military training would be putting the cart before the horse."

"Oh, fret not, General Martín. I personally will take full responsibility to train him while he stays here. Or are you dissatisfied with me as his teacher? What do you say, Sir Cristiano?"

General Puyol smiled, baring his teeth like a threatening beasts, whereupon Knight Captain Cris was stumped for an answer.

"W- Well..."

Puyol Guillén was too well-known for his skills on the South Continent to be actually dissatisfied with him. But unless he said so, he would definitely head towards his life as a hostage.

And on the surface, the general was supposedly suggesting this out of the goodness of his heart after "forgiving him for his mistake", which only made it even worse.

"I know why you are so concerned, General Martín. Sir Cristiano certainly has a brilliant talent. I shall pull no punches and do my utmost to nurture his promising skills."

The hero from the neighbouring country showed a joyful expression like a carnivore licking its lips in anticipating before its captured prey.

Was this the end? Knight Captain Cris was already starting to resign himself to his fate, when it happened.

"Oh my? Does that mean you are going to turn your back on your new wife already? You sadden me, Sir Puyol."

While General Puyol showed a bright smile, a woman suddenly interjected from the side.

"!? Lucinda?"

For the first time today, General Puyol looked dumbfounded in reaction to that voice.

The clear voice belonged to Lucinda, who approached her newlywed husband of a few days with small steps that let her elegant blue dress flutter a bit.

"Are we housing a guest already, Sir Puyol? I have entertained guests from the Navarre Kingdom a couple of times here in the Guzzle Mansion, but I am afraid it will be my first time doing so in your house. Of course I shall strive to do my best, but I cannot help but be worried about making a mistake."

To my shame, I have to admit that I once caused the Guzzle Household a lot of trouble by welcoming people from a foreign country the wrong way."

On the fact of it, she seemed to be an irresponsibly woman oblivious to the circumstances, when she mentioned that while cocking her head a bit.

But having spent the last few days in the same room with her, General Puyol knew that she was not that kind of foolish woman.

Considering that, he could read another meaning between the lines.

'I have entertained guests from the Navarre Kingdom a couple of times here in the Guzzle Mansion' implied that the March of Guzzle and the Navarre Kingdom shared a direct border.

And reading between the lines of 'I shall strive to do my best' meant: 'I am already part of the Guillén Family now, so I will obey whatever you, the head of the family, decide.'

Finally, the 'I once caused the Guzzle Household a lot of trouble' sentence could be understood as 'It will affect my parental house, the Guzzle Family, if we offend the Navarre Kingdom, so could you please show some consideration?'.



“Hmm...”

General Puyol glanced over to Marquis Guzzle at the back.

“.....”

When their eyes met by the light of the oil pans, the aged feudal lord sharpened his look to the point that you could feel the tension in the air.

“Causing me all this trouble! And you still call yourself my son-in-law!?”

He was obviously telling him that through eye-contact.

General Puyol quickly weighed the odds inside his head.

The merit of having a supposedly important person for the next generation of the Navarre Kingdom under his thumb versus the demerit of incurring the wrath of Marquis Guzzle after obtaining a connection to him through marriage.

It was a no-brainer. Once he knew what he had to do, he felt not the slightest hesitation or shame to take back his earlier words. From a human point of view, he might have to feel embarrassed by going back on a decision, but this attitude was actually beneficial for surviving in Higher Society.

“It certainly sounds unreasonable to apply myself to raising a disciple at the cost of neglecting my newlywed wife.

This being the case, I am sorry, Sir Cristiano, but I am withdrawing my earlier offer.”

“Not at all. I appreciate the thought at least.”

With his head still lowered, Knight Captain Cris heaved a long sigh of relief, releasing all the air from holding his breath until now.

# Chapter 6

## In the Aftermath

Although with some unexpected turns and twists, everything somehow wrapped up without problems and Zenjirou returned to the annex building with Princess Freya.

Behind them followed their two bodyguards: Knight Natalio and the female warrior Skathi. Waiting Maid Ines, who had been with Zenjirou ever since he left the Royal Palace, was otherwise engaged for the moment.

Apparently she had “accidentally spilled some water” and was going to clean it up before returning as well.

Zenjirou could not imagine her ever making a mistake on the job, but no matter how capable, the maid was still a human, so she was bound to make a mistake at some point.

Back in the annex building, Zenjirou separated from Princess Freya and changed clothes in his allocated room.

A well-rounded waiting maid of middle age in the service of the Guzzle Family helped him with it.

He felt a bit uncomfortable having someone else than the waiting maids of the Inner Palace help him change, but there was no other way, since he had only brought along Ines as his waiting maid.

Fortunately enough, the plump waiting maid seemed quite capable, so Zenjirou managed to change the stiff third formal attire for his casual wear in no time.

“Well done. You may leave. Oh, and send Nilda to me, when she arrives.”

“Understood. I shall take my leave now.”

The plumpish maid swept a curtsy and left the room.

“...Puh.”

Unlike with the waiting maids of the Inner Palace, Ines included, Zenjirou was vigilant about his conduct and speech in front of other maids, so he was tensed up at these times.

Sitting down on a simple couch prioritising functionality, he turned his head with small cracking sounds to relieve the tension.

“Ehm, where’s the towel again?... Ah, there. The nights here sure are irksome.”

Zenjirou shined on the table in front of the couch with the LED flashlight in his right hand and somehow managed to find the towel.

Technically speaking, there was an oil pan on the table for a light source, but the small flame was of no use for him, seeing as his night vision was poorly developed to begin with.

Slouching on the couch, Zenjirou wiped the sweat off his face and neck with the towel in his left hand, then looked down on the LED flashlight in his other hand.

“This thing sure saved the day...”

In order to avoid trouble, he kept the various tools he had brought along from Japan a secret as much as possible, but he was unable to do so this time.

Without revealing it, he would not have been able to expose the lie from the delegation of the Navarre Kingdom.

And a defeat absolutely had to be avoided in the latest trial.

If it had ended with their defeat, the result would have been that “a woman had complained to a knight, but had actually been wrong and apologized for it”.

And then it was quite likely that word got around that the woman in question, Nilda Guzzle, was actually not nobility.

That in turn would bring about the worst case scenario, namely that “a commoner woman started a fight with a knight and had actually be wrong about it”.

"At least we avoided the worst case... Yeah, I did well, if I may say so."

Zenjirou praised himself on a rare occasion.

Not only had he avoided the worst case scenario, he also worked out the promise that "the case was closed for good now and would not be spoken about ever again".

Due to that, it was impossible that this case gained any more ground. Zenjirou certainly had "done well".

"The problem is Princess Freya, though. I made her play a really unrewarding role... Argh, I get the feeling I'm digging my own grave deeper and deeper"

The heavy sigh from Zenjirou slowly dispersed in the semi-darkness of the wide room.

◊ ◊ ◊

As the winner, Zenjirou was fatigued from his accomplishment, but as the losers, the delegation from the Navarre Kingdom was wearied from their defeat.

"General Martín, I apologize for the troubles I have caused this time."

Just where had his usual confidence gone to? Cristiano Pinto had fallen into a deep depression and lowered his head to the respected hero of his country with these words.

This latest case had been quite arduously, especially at the end, when General Puyol had practically tried to abduct him.

"Well, you went through a lot, too. At least, you know now that the world is full of scary people. Keep that lesson in mind."

“Yes, Sir.”

General Martín generously comforted his favoured young subordinate, but he was actually even more shaken than Knight Captain Cris at heart.

(Oh god, the playground the Marquis and I prepared in secret was perfectly blown to pieces.)

The situation had escalated beyond his control to the point that he wanted to smack himself for ever thinking that it was the perfect opportunity for letting Knight Captain Cris and Xavier Guzzle experience a real negotiation, a few days ago.

Needless to say, it was all due to Princess Freya, who had butted in right from the beginning, Zenjirou, who had given the decisive blow in the middle of the trial, and General Puyol, who had tried to squeeze profit from it at the very end.

Thanks to them, Xavier was pushed onto a backseat and Knight Captain Cris was one-sidedly beaten up.

(Well, even geniuses need to taste defeat and realize that there are people they absolutely cannot beat right now.)

In retrospect, General Martín was not all that dissatisfied with the result.

“It is not wrong per se to stand up for your subordinate, even when he is in the wrong, but if you deal arbitrarily with it, it will only earn you the resentment from friend and foe alike, so act with care.”

“Yes, I will take it to heart.”

Assessed by his respected superior like this, Knight Captain Cris finally looked a bit more calm.

The words from General Martín were not just meant as consolation.

Generally speaking, it was hardly commendable to cover for a subordinate, who had

committed a mistake, but in the army, it was not a bad choice for when the superior wanted to gain the trust of his subordinates.

Especially in a supposedly low profile case like this one, the superior could give his subordinate the favourable impression “I’m on your side!” by actively standing up for him.

Having said all this, it was necessary to draw a clear line at it, because if not, some subordinates would think that their superior would protect them no matter what they did.

Because of that, General Martín did not consider the behaviour from Knight Captain Cris as fundamentally wrong this time.

It also had been a good choice to not bring the main culprit, Knight Raymundo, here.

Knight Captain Cris must have expected to get severely scolded by General Martín.

Not bringing Knight Raymundo along showed his resolve to shoulder the reprimand from the general all by himself.

A man, who could protect you not only from enemies, but sometimes even from superiors, was well-liked in the army.

Nevertheless, Knight Captain Cris certainly had not been without flaw in his approach.

General Martín changed the expression on his bear-like face into a strict one and rebuked the young knight captain with a low voice.

“Your biggest mistake was to reflexively take up a fighting stance in front of His Majesty Zenjirou. I was sweating bullets back then. Learn to control yourself a bit better.”

“Y- You noticed that!?”

When Knight Captain Cris exclaimed in surprise, General Martín knitted his brow.

"Of course. General Puyol surely did as well. If you had actually touched your sword, he would have jumped in.

In that sense, it was a close call. The little self-restrain you had left truly saved your life."

(That female warrior seemed to have noticed it, too, but I better not tell him that.)

He calmly concluded that right now, Knight Captain Cris was in no state to accept the fact that a woman was stronger than him.

"..."

The young knight captain widened his eyes dumbfounded in reaction to the words from his respected general.

He had only taken up the stance for a second and to be honest, he did not thought anyone had noticed amidst the semi-darkness.

Knight Captain Cris admitted that his character and leadership qualities were still falling behind, but even the quality he had the most confidence in, namely fighting strength, was apparently nowhere near a match for the heroes of the previous war.

"Actually... I only managed to restrain myself by chance. When I took a step backwards, I stepped into a small puddle. Its coldness somehow made me come back to my senses."

"Now that's what I call a stroke of luck."

General Martín cocked his head a bit, when he heard about the puddle on the stony floor of the room, but brushed it off as a mishap from an earlier cleaning session.

"Anyway, I will be frank with you: Our Navarre Kingdom is by no means a big country on the western part of the South Continent. We are more often the inferior party in diplomatic negotiations.

Unless you learn some discretion, we cannot let you leave the country again. Not everyone will necessarily be as generous as His Majesty Zenjirou. If anything, consider people like General Puyol the norm."

Zenjirou and General Puyol were obviously extreme on both ends of the spectrum and thus extremely rare exceptions, but he deliberately chose to scold his subordinate with an exaggerated opinion.

“Yes, Sir. I understand. Such an idiocy will never happen again.”

Knight Captain Cris promised solemnly, full of vim and vigor, so General Martín nodded a “Good” in response.

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Around the same time, Marquis Guzzle and his children were sharing their feeling of happiness of having passed the storm en famille.

“It sure was an ordeal, Nilda, Xavier.”

The son and daughter replied with a smile to their father Marquis Guzzle.

“No, my incompetence brought this all about. Fortunately enough, Master Zenjirou lent us his power and protected Nilda’s reputation, but I could not protect my important little sister by myself.

And just when Big Sister Lucinda had entrusted everything to me after getting married. How am I supposed to face her now?”

“Please do not feel so down, Brother. You really did your best to protect me. I was really happy.”

“Yet there’s no point, if I achieve nothing.”

Looking troubled, the little sister from a different mother comforted her depressed older brother sitting next to her with all her might.

Watching over them, Marquis Guzzle inadvertently cracked a smile, because of the heart-warming relationship between the siblings.

But considering the future, this was no time to be all smiles.

The eldest daughter Lucinda was the reason why the Guzzle Family had such a pleasant interaction.

She had helped her father with his work, raised her little brother into the next head of the family and gave her country bumpkin of a little sister from a different mother a strict training in high society etiquette, all the while giving them enough love to make everyone feel like "family".

Even now, Lucinda had kindly held General Puyol back at the very end, warding off any further trouble.

But she was no longer with them.

"Anyway, I am glad it went off without a hitch. Xavier, I am sure you have to reflect on a lot of things, but do not let it drag you down. Learning from your past mistakes means you will do better in the future."

"Yes, Father."

His son nodded obediently with a most sincere look, whereupon the father shifted uncomfortable in his seat.

He had said these words more to himself than anything.

(Man, I really should stick to what I'm used to. Because I let General Martín sweet-talk me into doing this, things almost got out of hand. I'm a simple-minded idiot, so I shouldn't be greedy and solve problems one after another.)

One of his strong points was to quickly get back on track once he had reflected on things.

When the marquis had pulled himself together, he shifted his gaze from his son to his daughter.

"You did not have it easy, either, Nilda. But remember that you are partly to blame for this. You are already fifteen years old, so you need to act in an appropriate manner for a noble woman."

Looking a bit younger than her actual age, the fifteen-year-old girl looked down

dejected, so that her short ponytail swayed a bit.

Seeing his daughter clearly being in low spirits, Marquis Guzzle did not soften his strict expression, but was shaken at heart.

(Aw, is she going to cry? Damn. Lucinda usually helped me comfort her at times like these. I ended up scolding her like always.)

The old feudal lord cleared his throat with a cough.

"So I say, but with Lucinda gone now, there is no one left to teach you properly here."

Needless to say, Lucinda had not been the only noble woman in the March of Guzzle.

As the lord of the March, the Guzzle Family had a lot of vassals serving them and there obviously were women amongst these families.

However, they were just vassals in the end. Although technically nobility as well, their etiquette and common sense somewhat changed according to the status.

A court nobility would take a family specialized on teaching etiquette as a vassal, but unfortunately, the Guzzle Family was a military family and had no such educated human resources.

"Then what am I supposed to do, Father?"

When the daughter cocked her head worriedly, her aged father revealed his plan.

"I had planned this for a long time already, but when I am returning to the capital, you will accompany me. I know a person or two there, who can teach you."

In light of these words, her face suddenly lit up with elation.

"I'm going to the capital? Really!?"

Like any other girl her age, she obviously longed for the glamorous capital.

"Yeah, you official came of age this year. I have to introduce you to higher society in the capital at least once."

"Okay! Oh, speaking of, Master Zenjirou offered to show me around, when I ever come to the Capital. Will it actually be alright to take him at his word?"

Her father raised an eyebrow for a second in reaction to her unexpected announcement.

"Hmm? Master Zenjirou actually said that? How intriguing. It does sound to be more than just mere pleasantry. Once we are in the capital, you can try sending him a letter. If it was indeed no pleasantry, he will surely reply favourably."

"Yes. But about that letter..."

"Of course you will have to write it yourself."

"...Okay."

Nilda made heavy weather of writing of all things, so she frowned a bit troubled.

Happily observing each and any adorable demeanour of his daughter, the father mumbled under his breath.

"Still, a teacher for Nilda, eh. The most suited would be Amanda, but... I doubt it will work out. Well, it cannot hurt to ask at least."

And like this, Marquis Guzzle considered contacting his far younger cousin, who was working as the Supervisory Maid of the Inner Palace.

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Inside a different room of the annex building than Zenjirou, Princess Freya stripped off her light blue formal dress and swapped it for a one-piece casual wear.

Her bodyguard and attendant, Skathi, helped her with it.

During their trip between the continent, they had been the only women aboard anyway. Although it was not her main job, Skathi had adequate skills as a waiting maid.

“Thanks, Skathi. Are you not going to change?”

When her master asked her after having changed clothes, the female warrior brandished her favourite spear.

“I am your bodyguard after all.”

“I see. Thank you as always, Skathi. But at least sit down, please.”

“Okay, if you insist.”

According to the plea from Princess Freya, the tall warrior sat down on the couch across from her master. Needless to say, her spear with the tusk of a sea monster was resting against the rest of the couch and in order to be ready to jump into action at any moment, she was not stretching out and relaxing as much as Princess Freya.

The oil pan burning on top of the table coloured the short silver hair from Princess Freya and the long blonde hair from Skathi in a mystic red.

Amidst this semi-darkness, the northern princess hugged herself and showed a gleeful smile.

“Aw, did you see that, Skathi? That expression on the knight, when His Majesty Zenjirou cornered him! He was literally scared to death! I wish you would praise me for not rejoicing over it right then and there!”

The veteran female warrior gave a wry smile to her strangely excited master.

“Milady, please calm down a bit. Well, I cannot deny that it was a fantastic comeback, either.”

"I know, right! Moreover, His Majesty Zenjirou did not only pry a confession out of the knight in question, but also out of that conceited Knight Captain Cris. I fell for His Majesty all over again!"

When her master was very outspoken about it, the subservient female warrior put on a worried expression.

"When you say all over again, you mean you had fallen for him before already?"

The serious question from Skathi was affirmed by Princess Freya without any hesitation whatsoever.

"Why, yes. But saying I had 'fallen for him' before already, might a bit of an overstatement. I definitely harboured an 'affection' toward him, though."

I mean, I had such a nice time during our trip from the Capital to the March of Guzzle and I can basically count these occasions in my life on one hand."

"Well, you do have a point."

Having spent most of her life alongside Princess Freya, Skathi knew she was speaking from the bottom of her heart.

On the North Continent, Princess Freya also had participated in hunts and the like, but the group of soldiers still had treated her as a "princess" in the end.

And she was only allowed to hunt foxes or rabbits by herself to begin with. Even when she was taking down a deer or reindeer, numerous soldiers secured the area while she send an arrow at best.

Whereas here she was allowed to finish off a dragon with a spear in her own hands.

It was undoubtedly the memory of a lifetime to her.

She was keeping the forehead horn of the slain Meat Dragon in safe custody and apparently intended to have a craftsman make an ornament out of it once she was back in the Capital.

Then Princess Freya replied with a smile.

"Of course the dragon hunt left the deepest impression with me, but there is more to it than just that. I greatly enjoyed the time inside the carriage with His Majesty Zenjirou as well.

He was being considerate to me, not because I am a 'woman', but because I am a fellow human... I cannot express it well, but I did not get a headache with him, like I do, when I converse with other men. It was a really pleasant atmosphere."

For better or worse, Zenjirou was still clinging to his moral values as a Japanese. Of course he was being educated in etiquette and manner of speaking, so he changed his mannerism depending on the status and gender of whom he dealt with, but the fundamental value that everyone was equal could not be taken from him.

The longer you dealt with him, the more obvious it got that he was "not looking down on you".

"And not to forget the latest incident. It really makes my heart jump for joy that he is so different from other men."

Princess Freya had been put in the line of fire for this incident and Zenjirou was feeling guilty about having "brought her into disrepute", but she herself was not regarding it as something bad.

From the very beginning, she could not stomach the attitude from Knight Raymundo, putting the blame on them, anyway.

Nevertheless, she kept herself in check, because she could not afford to cause trouble for Zenjirou as his partner. But then he had told her: "It's okay. Break loose. I'll take responsibility."

Princess Freya could not have been happier about this.

Although Zenjirou seemed to regret to have dragged her reputation on the South Continent through the mire, it was no big deal for her.

The only one she wanted to marry on the South Continent was Zenjirou anyway, so as long as he himself harboured no ill feelings towards her, there was no need to worry about the opinion of others.

And if her marriage with him were to not work out for some reason, she would just be

called home to the North Continent for a political marriage.

She would never set foot on the South Continent again then, so a somewhat bad reputation there would have no effect on her life.

Well, the reason Princess Freya could honestly not bother with a bad reputation was surely because her spirit was more resilient than the average.

“His Majesty Zenjirou had put his faith into me. Not the kind of blind faith people throw around, but actual faith in my ‘capabilities’, such as seeing in the dark or memorizing circumstances calmly.

And he even demanded that Knight Captain Cris, who had doubted my competence from the very start, corrects himself.”

“He sure did.”

While agreeing with her, Skathi calmly observed her respected master.

She truly seemed to have “fallen for him”. Or more precisely, her previous “favourable impression” had developed into a “genuine love”.

Nevertheless, it was the kind of love she would get over in no time, if her father were to put a stop to it by telling her to give up. In this sense, Princess Freya had a profound understanding of natural-born Royalty. Even so, it did not change the fact that she was in love.

Serving Princess Freya for as long as she could remember, Skathi was having mixed feelings.

(My little tomboy princess fell in love with a man, who never held a sword in his hands. She only seemed to be scheming something, when she proposed to His Majesty Zenjirou, though. Love works in mysterious ways.)

The female warrior was waxing sentimental. In the meantime, the northern princess flushed her snow-white cheeks a bit and continued.

“So Skathi, I want to hear your opinion. His Majesty Zenjirou mentioned he never received any military training and I believe him, but what do you say?”

"Yes, there is no doubt. Pardon me for saying this, but his military prowess truly is that of a woman or child."

So the atypical woman said.

She was practically badmouthing her future husband candidate, but Princess Freya actually smiled brighter in response.

"I knew it. Then I would like to discuss something with you. I came up with a plan to get closer to His Majesty on the trip back."

"...I am all ears."

Skathi got a bad feeling about where the conversation was going, but she could not stop her master based on a hunch alone.

Without noticing that her retainer narrowed her auburn eyes to slits, Princess Freya explained her idea with a beaming smile.

"On the way back, we are going to spend a few nights in the carriage, right? That is when I will make my move. I have the strength of a soldier, so I should be able to push down His Majesty. No worries! He might resist at first, but once we get to the steamy part..."

"Mi-la-dy!"

Skathi scolded her master with a low voice, when she proposed a gender reversal of the "night adventurer" she had learned from the crude sailors.

# Epilogue

## The Way Back Home

A few days later.

Zenjirou was once again shaken around inside the carriage drawn by eight dragons. The other passengers were the same as before, too.

His partner for the marriage ceremony Princess Freya and her bodyguard the female warrior Skathi.

His own bodyguard Knight Natalio and the Waiting Maid of the Inner Palace Ines. A total of five people, including Zenjirou himself.

The large carriage was not all that wide, matching the width of the street, but had the length of a single railway carriage, so five people had plenty of space for themselves.

With an attached sleeping quarter, the carriage rather reminded Zenjirou of a large “camping van”.

Although it did look fancy on the outside, it had no suspension, nor rubber tires, so it could hardly be called a comfortable ride, but Zenjirou had gotten used to it on the journey there, so he did not perceive it as all that bad. And not to forget the soft cushions.

At least it was comfortable enough to allow for some casual chit-chat.

But precisely because of that, Zenjirou felt worse than on the outbound trip, which had still been a bit rough back then.

As for the reason:

“I am most interested in the sea, I guess. As long as Her Majesty Aura allows it, I wish to travel further to the south of the South Continent with the ‘Yellow Leaves’ at some point.”

Princess Freya was actively striking up a conversation with him now that they had obviously gotten closer after the latest incident.

"That sounds most fascinating. Our country lies in the centre of the western part of the South Continent. There are various countries further south and when you take the boat east from there, you can apparently get around to the southern end of the central part of the continent."

"Oh my. I imagine it would be quite the adventure to go around the whole South Continent once someday."

"Haha, adventurous as ever, I see. But I reckon it would be quite difficult. The northern area of the South Continent is one big lifeless desert. Even if you pass by there with the 'Yellow Leaves', you need to stock up on everything plentiful beforehand. It seems there are almost no chances to restock on the way."

"Oh, that reminds me, my vice-captain told me the same thing before."

While conversing with Princess Freya, Zenjirou was shaking his head distressed at heart.

Not because the conversation with Princess Freya caused him a headache, but quite the contrary: He noticed that he was unwittingly drawn into the conversation with her.

Zenjirou was not so dense to miss such an obvious approach from a girl, neither was he so emotionless to be unaffected by the smile of such a beautiful princess.

It would still be a bit of an exaggeration to call it a seduction, but her physical contact had gotten a good ten centimetre more intimate, and Zenjirou was certainly stirred up by it.

(So friggin' close!)

As a matter of fact, hardly anyone would be bothered, when he actually accepted Princess Freya, but the man in question could not abandon his monogamy values that easily.

Already married to his beloved wife Aura, he instinctively felt guilty, when another woman captivated him.

"Speaking of, Your Majesty Zenjirou, the 'Yellow Leaves' should finish its repairs soon. We intend to return to Valentia once to conduct a shakedown cruise, but would you like to accompany us?"

It is really great to feel the sea breeze on your skin on the open sea."



But for all that, he could not afford to cut the conversation short.

"Oh, that sounds fun. I sure would love to, when it is just a cruise near the coast. Just spare me of any surprises like suddenly heading to the North Continent, please. I would not be able to go home. Ahaha."

"....."

"Ehm, Princess Freya? Did you hear me? Why are you suddenly falling silent?"

"Ah, no, please do not mind me. I was just thinking about something."

"Is that so. Well, I need to check my schedule, though, if we are going to Valentia. Her Majesty might be able to 'leap' us there, but it will take a few days to get back after all."

Whilst replying like that, Zenjirou reminded himself to learn to use "Teleport" by himself in the future.

As a matter of fact, he had succeeded in pronouncing the chant for "Teleport" correctly once during this trip.

Of course he still had a long way to go, but it certainly was a big step forward towards mastering "Teleport".

(Without 'teleport', I can't go to the Twin Kingdom after all. And I really need to be able to bring a healer over from there, when Aura gives birth again.)

At this point, he recalled a certain fact.

(Oh, right. Before giving birth, we need to make a baby first. The abstinence finally ended, but then I had to go on a business trip for over a month. I'm gonna get busy with my waifu once I'm home!)

As expected, Zenjirou was pretty devoted to Aura.

".....Hah."

Deep in thought about sex fantasies with Aura, Zenjirou did not notice how the silver-haired princess sitting next to him heaved a small sigh as though she suffered a defeat.

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Around the same time in the Royal Palace, the Queen of the Carpa Kingdom and beloved wife of Zenjirou: Aura I. exposed an unbecoming appearance by baring her bosoms to the man in front of her.

Having said this, the Queen was not having an affair or anything.

Sitting on a chair, Aura was revealing her chest to a bearded elderly man with white hair: The Royal Physician Doctor Michelle.

“...”

Needless to say, the aged physician showed not the slightest reaction to the ample bust of the Queen, but rather palpated her belly with a serious look.

“How is it, Your Majesty? Do you feel something, when I press down here?”

“...No, nothing out of the ordinary, really.”

“Hmm, I see. Thank you, Your Majesty. You may put your clothes back on now.”

In light of his words, Aura fixed her dress, covering her exposed front again.

After adjusting the crimson red dress skilfully, she asked the trustworthy doctor right away.

“So, let me hear your opinion. Am I carrying a ‘second child’?”

Just like she had said, the doctor had been checking, whether Queen Aura was pregnant with a second child or not.

Her menstruation had been late this month. Normally, it should have come roughly ten

days ago. Since it did not, she had wondered: "Could it be?"

So with these expectations, she had asked Doctor Michelle for a check-up, but the old physician shook his head with a pensive face.

"Hard to say. To be honest, I could not find any symptoms of a pregnancy."

The Queen displayed an obvious disappointment to the words from Doctor Michelle.

"I see. Well, I am not having any aversions or cravings like before. Then it is just an irregularity in my monthly cycle, I guess."

With these words, the Queen tried to stand up from her chair, but the aged doctor stopped her with a wave of his hand.

"No, Your Majesty, it is too early to say that. It saddens me as a doctor to say this, but even seasoned doctors have trouble to diagnose a pregnancy in its early stage."

It is entirely possible that you are pregnant, when you are having coitus and your menstruation fails to appear."

"Is that so? But I am not going through the food aversions or cravings like I did with Carlos."

Although nurturing a hope again, the Queen was still doubtful, whereas the elderly physician explained in a soft tone.

"Most women certainly show such signs during a pregnancy, but they do not necessarily go through the same every single time."

It is not unheard of that a woman craves for some sour food on her first pregnancy, but wishes for some sweet food on her second pregnancy."

"Oh? Then we cannot rule out the possibility?"

The Queen exhibited a glint in her two brown eyes, which could be mistaken as red on a glance.

"Indeed. So for at least half a month, I want you to act on the assumption that you are pregnant. That means drinking alcohol as always is out of the question."

Even the Monarch of a country was weak against the prescription of a doctor.

"Ugh... So be it. Ah, does that mean I should refrain from night-time activities until the results are out, too? My husband is supposed to return in a few days..."

"That goes without saying."

When the Queen asked him the question she suddenly thought of, Doctor Michelle immediately replied like that.

On Modern Earth, sexual intercourse during pregnancy was not prohibited per se as long as you were mindful of contraception and position, but unfortunately, the medical science had not advanced that far in this world.

So the prescription from Doctor Michelle was only natural.

But it was a somewhat troubling matter for Aura.

"Hmm, so my husband will have to endure it again for at least half a month, or possibly a year, even when he gets home."

Aura knew from a matter of fact, not out of conceit, that Zenjirou only had eyes for her.

The best way to console a grumpy Zenjirou for the concubine matter had been sleeping with him. And now he was returning while that option was no longer viable.

"Sheesh, what am I going to do..."

The Queen actually bothered her head about the supposedly happy news of a possible pregnancy.

# Extra Stories about the Waiting Maids and their Master: Game Device Maintenance

After their Master Zenjirou had departed for the March of Guzzle, the Inner Palace was engulfed in a hectic atmosphere.

One of the waiting maids had already left the Inner Palace, because of her engagement, whereas two other waiting maids were still remaining here, even though their engagement had been decided as well. In exchange, three new waiting maids had come in.

The change in the staff alone was already pretty demanding, but the existence of Princess Freya from the Uppsala Kingdom came on board, at that.

Her chances as a “concubine” candidate were so high it was practically set in stone already.

Needless to say, it would still be far off into the future until Princess Freya moved into the Inner Palace, even if she was set to become a concubine, but the attending waiting maids were obviously confronted with various changes long way before that.

They had to clean the currently closed off annex, so it was ready to welcome a resident at any time, and needed to adjust their workload for cleaning and filling the bath, since there would be one more preferential person using it.

On top of that, Zenjirou had suggested building a sauna in according with the culture of Princess Freya’s home country, so Supervisory Maid Amanda also had to wrack her brain about its location and fuel as well as water supply.

Whilst the Inner Palace was caught up in turmoil like that, the “Three Troublemakers” Fay, Dolores and Rethé were troubled by something entirely different.

The entrance of a concubine was nothing but a concern for the future. But the “Three Troublemakers” were currently facing a problem so acute that they had no time to think ahead. Due to it, the girls were given sleepless nights lately.

A problem so grave it did not let the “Three Troublemakers” sleep at night.

Namely: “Zenjirou took the two portable game consoles with him” and nothing more.

“Uhh... I’m bored...”

The petite waiting maid Fay lay flat on her bed in their private room and lamented pathetically.

Even speaking generously, the scene of her trashing about her two legs as she lay prone in her nightwear could only be described as a “child throwing a silent tantrum”.

Fortunately enough, the room was wrapped in complete darkness right now.

“Shut up, Fay. I can’t sleep.”

Sleeping neatly on her back in the next bed, the slim and tall waiting maid Dolores raised an angry voice. It was pretty much a false accusation, though.

The one to point that out was their other roommate sleeping in the third bed: Rethé.

“Dolores-chan, I doubt you would be able to sleep, even if she were to be quiet~”

Although not visible in the darkness right now, her characteristic voluptuous breasts could still be identified as “big” at a glance, when she was laying on her back. She rebuked her roommate with a leisurely tone, giving an account of her inborn personality.

“Well, maybe so...”

As a matter of fact, the reason the three of them could not sleep at night was not related to noise in the slightest.

They simply could not sleep, because they usually did not go to bed this early.

Normally, the three girls would indulge themselves in playing with the portable game console in turns at this time.

In that regard, they were the spitting image of a middle or high school student, who had the habit to stay up late to play games.

The game console had been taken away from them and their monthly supply of oil for illumination had a limit, so they could not light it up all that often. As a result, there was nothing else to do but sleep. However, that was easier said than done.

So the “Three Troublemakers” continued to make some contextless conversation until the tiredness would take over.

“Hmm, I wonder what Master Zenjirou is doing right now? He wouldn’t delete our save data by accident, would he?”

“D- Don’t jinx it! I don’t even want to think about it! The games are fun and all, but I definitely wouldn’t want to start games like Gekirin from scratch again.”

Dolores sat up with a shocked expression in reaction to the words from Fay. Well, who could blame her? Even if you liked games, it was not all that fun to slay hundreds of the same monster in order to get a rare drop.

All the more for Dolores, who was especially unlucky. Although an item had a drop rate of two percent, she actually managed to not get a single drop after killing over hundred monsters (even though one was supposed to drop every fifty kills).

*Games are a good entertainment, but rare drop farming is a pain in the ass.*

That was what Dolores said with her head plunged into her pillow, when she finally obtained the item after one-hundred and thirty kills.

“Haha~ I would hate that, too~ If that happened to me, I might not play that game

anymore~”

On the other hand, Rethe was luckier than Dolores, but had a hopeless talent for the controls, so she gave her honest opinion.

But in actual fact, their worries were completely unfounded.

Zenjirou owned a couple of memory cards for the save data of the portable game consoles.

Aside from the beginning, where he “competed” against the waiting maids in the drop-down puzzle game or the go-cart racing game, Zenjirou was now changing the memories cards for when he was playing by himself or lending it to the waiting maids by tagging the console with “free to take”.

Needless to say, the two game consoles he had taken with him on the current trip had his personal memories cards inserted.

The waiting maids obviously did not know about these circumstances. They may be called the “Three Troublemakers”, but they were still proper waiting maids of the Inner Palace. There was no way they would be allowed to freely fiddle around with the borrowed game console of their master.

Accordingly, they only knew how to swap the game software and how to turn the console on and off from the manual translated by Zenjirou.

Well, considering the fact that they took the gaming device of their master to their own room almost every night and played until dropping with exhaustion, they were “Troublemakers” alright, even if it said “free to take”.

“Ugh, now that they’re gone, I start to miss the games even more...”

“Yeah, you can say that again...”

It stood to reason that the Supervisory Maid called them “Troublemakers”, when Fay and the others were chatting away daydreaming, because they could not sleep, but they deserved some pity as well.

After all, the reason they had developed the habit of “staying up late” was Zenjirou’s fault.

With the LED floor lamps from Earth at his side, Zenjirou was staying up late (by the standards of this world) at night. And Queen Aura ended up doing the same, because she was living with him.

Since the waiting maids had to take care of them, some of them were required to do their duties late into the night.

More precisely, the waiting maids on cleaning duty also waited on them, so they had to be on stand-by in the room next to the living room until Zenjirou and Aura went to bed.

All other departments, cooking, gardening and bathing, were going to bed like always. Due to that, the waiting maids had a somewhat erratic work schedule.

Most of them had gotten used to the irregular bed time, but the recently admitted new waiting maids had not gotten used to the late-night work hours yet and were fighting against the tiredness inside the antechamber.

In contrast, the “Three Troublemakers” had adopted to working late hours all too well.

While on cleaning duty, they obviously worked late into the night, but even on the other duties, they took the game console to their room and played until sleep got the better of them.

In other words, the daily rhythm from cleaning duty had become the norm for all other days as well.

They stayed up late on a daily basis. That sounded extremely unhealthy, but “staying up late” in this world would not even be considered as such in Modern Japan. At the very least, they were not staying up past midnight here.

The days also started early, so a direct comparison fell short, but at the very least, they could get enough sleep, when they got used to it while still young.

Precisely because of that, the three girls were facing the problem of sleeplessness right now, though.

“I-still-can-not-sleep!”

“Aw, shut up. You’re so noisy.”

“Hmm... I feel a bit sleepy~ I think~?”

The hushed, but importunate conversation of the “Three Troublemakers” continued on a for a little while longer.

◊ ◊ ◊

Supervisory Maid Amanda was, like the title given to her implied, an extremely capable servant with a lot of skills and work experience.

But even someone like her was serving a “person from a different world” for the first time.

For Zenjirou, it only looked like she was doing her job absolutely flawlessly, but she actually considered him a rather “demanding” master.

After all, her normal common sense did not apply to him.

He hated the smell of aromatic oil and the smell of sweat just as much. Moreover, he was being considerate towards the servants for some reason and never voiced any of these discomforts.

Waiting Maid and high-born nobility alike, Supervisory Maid Amanda was quite adept at reading the expression of others, but she would have never thought she had to use that skill in its entirety for her employing master instead of social gatherings.

But rather than these trivia, Supervisory Maid Amanda viewed Zenjirou to “be a handful”, because he was “going easy on” the waiting maids.

Only the work of the young waiting maids became lighter, when their master went easy on them. Supervisory Maid Amanda had to oversee these young waiting maids, so a lenient master was, if anything, troublesome for her.

The Supervisory Maid had to be strict with the guidance and supervision of the young waiting maids. But when the master in question acted lenient towards the maids, the waiting maids just ended up taking it easy.

And it was even worse in Zenjirou’s case: He was not only lenient with them, he actually preferred it, when the maids released their tension.

Approving a relaxed atmosphere around their lenient master while preventing the skills of the young waiting maids from getting rusty and enforcing the rules, when it matters. Supervisory Maid Amanda was expected to reconcile these two contradictions. It was quite the tall order.

After more than a year, she believed that she had gotten a good idea of his lenience, but what he told her before leaving for his trip boggled even her mind a bit.

"I am fully aware that Master Zenjirou is a lenient person and that he especially took a liking to the 'Three Troublemakers'...but I am getting the feeling that he is being far too indulgent this time."

Mumbling to herself, Supervisory Maid Amanda heaved a sigh, but there was no way she could ignore an order from her master.

So she shrugged her shoulders while massaging her temples with her index finger and thumb.

◊ ◊ ◊

The sign said Supervisory Maid Office, but it felt more like an interrogation room. Not all the young waiting maids were thinking that, but at least Fay, Dolores and Rethe took that view.

Summoned to that Supervisory Maid Office, the "Three Troublemakers" stood before Supervisory Maid Amanda with meek expressions.

They were used to it by now.

"Mrs. Amanda."

"We have come at your behest."

"What can we do for you~?"

Supervisory Maid Amanda heaved a sigh, seeing as the "Three Troublemakers"

already had resigned themselves to being scolded from the fact alone that they were called to the office at lunch break.

(In other words, they have a guilty conscience. And probably about various things, at that. Sheesh, these girls...)

As though showing them an example, Supervisory Maid Amanda stood neatly and tidily before the three young maids, speaking to them.

“Fay, Dolores, Rethé. I have a special assignment for you.”

For a second, the “Three Troublemakers” reacted with repulsion in unison.

“Yes.”

“Very well.”

“Please just say the word~”

It really only lasted for a second. In the next moment, they answered loud and clear, but it gave Supervisory Maida Amanda a headache.

(To think a waiting maid of the Inner Palace would actually display displeasure in the face of work... I will have to reeducate them later on.)

Even while harbouring such thoughts, Supervisory Maid Amanda had perfect control over her emotions, so nothing of it could be discerned in her expression, nor her voice.

“Then I shall give you the details. However, know that this assignment is not something you have to undertake at all costs. If you think it goes beyond your abilities, just come out and say so.

You girls know about the personal belongings Master Zenjirou brought along from his homeland, correct?”

“Yes!”

Personal belongings from Zenjirou. The “Three Troublemakers” flinched in reaction to the words. After all, anything involving these usually entailed either “something yummy” or “something fun”.

Seeing the three of them immediately lean forward with a glint in their eyes, Supervisory Maid Amanda felt vindicated in thinking they needed reeducation.

(It kind of irritates me how their positive to a fault thinking is right this time. Good grief, Master Zenjirou is way too lenient.)

“You see, a certain personal belonging from Master Zenjirou is collecting dust while he is away. He told me that it would be hurtful to leave it untouched for a long time, so if possible, he wants us to put it to use at times.”

Comprehending the meaning of these words at once, the “Three Troublemakers” could no longer withhold their excitement and showed bright smiles.

“Very well!”

“Please leave it to us!”

“We will do our best~!”

The personal belonging in question was the stationary game console from Zenjirou.

Needless to say, the “hurtful to leave it untouched for a long time” was nothing but an excuse. Zenjirou was just being generous.

The game console was also an electrical appliance, so of course it was better to run it regularly, but it was nothing so fragile that it would stop functioning just from neglecting it for a mere month.

No matter how you look at it, it was obviously just an excuse to let the “Three Troublemakers” play with the stationary game console.

Zenjirou had remembered how Fay and the other two had watched the screen full of curiosity, when he had played with the console in the living room.

As far as he was concerned, he would have invited them to play together, but considering their standings as master and servants, he could not do that.

If word were to spread that he invited the waiting maids on duty to play with him, it was more than likely that the maids would be considered his concubines. Of course that was quite oversimplifying the matter, but not entirely unthinkable, so he ought to be careful about it.

Hence he used the current business trip as an excuse to let Fay and the others play with the stationary game console.

(Just how much does Master Zenjirou intend to spoil them?)

Heaving a sigh only at heart, Supervisory Maid Amanda declared with a strict expression.

"Having said this, you will be doing this in addition to your normal work and I will not stand for it, when you neglect your assigned tasks, so do it at night after you are done with your usual duties.

Her Majesty Aura has already given her permission. Once she has retreated to her bedchamber, you may use the living room. Of course you are not allowed to make any noises that disturb her slumber and it goes without saying that you will be tidying everything up perfectly afterwards. Also, you only have an hour at the maximum.

Her Majesty Aura is not as lenient as Master Zenjirou after all."

Supervisory Maid Amanda cautioned them like that, so even the "Three Troublemakers" became anxious, looking meek.

Queen Aura was not an unreasonable master, who vented on her servants, but just like Amanda had said, she was not as tolerant as Zenjirou, either.

When a mere maid dared to cause trouble for her master, she was sure to get punished. Even more so while Zenjirou, who usually smoothed things over, was away.

"Yes, we will be careful."

"We shall cause no trouble for Her Majesty."

"We will play quietly~"

Straightening their backs, the three young waiting maids spoke determined.

“I do hope so.”

Answering them expressionless, Supervisory Maid Amanda heaved the biggest sigh at heart today.

(When I mentioned Her Majesty Aura, they admittedly pulled themselves together, but neither did they back down. Especially Reth.)

“And Reth, this is a work assignment, not ‘playing around’.”

“Yes, my apologies~”

Supervisory Maid Amanda remarked with her eyes narrowed to slits, whereupon Reth widened her tension-free slitted eyes and lowered her head with attitude.

◊ ◊ ◊

On the night of the same day, the living room of the Inner Palace accommodated three people.

One petite figure like a child. One slim and tall figure like a model. And one glamorous figure with breasts so enormous you could tell by its silhouette alone.

It were Fay, Dolores and Reth.

Zenjirou would describe the living room right now as “pitch-black”, but the people of this world were used to seeing in the dark, so the room was still bright enough for them to move around as long as they paid attention.

The control device of the hydropower generator and the panel of the large refrigerator were continuously emitting light after all.

This sparse illumination was enough to discern the positions of the furniture. But it only prevented you from bumping your foot into stuff like the couch, at best. Any more demanding movements required a proper light.

After slowly getting to the couch by walking on tiptoe like a thief, Fay turned on the LED floor lamp standing near the couch.

“Uwah, so bright.”

(Idiot, not so loud! Her Majesty Aura will hear us in the bedchamber!)

(Ah, sorry.)

Fay apologized sincerely, when Dolores scolded her with a glare.

For better or worse, even the optimistic and carefree Fay was afraid of Queen Aura. Not only because she wielded a factual authority and physical strength, but because of her overwhelming aura that made you bow as a reflex, when she glared at you.

(Hmm, I guess we better do not turn on any more lights~?)

(Well, I get the feeling that would be too overcautious, but this much light is enough, so yeah.)

Fay agreed to Rethé's suggestion like that.

(Then let's get started. Do you girls know how to plug it in? I guess not. I'll do it.)

The one to take the initiative like that was Dolores. The tall woman got down on all fours by putting her hands and feet onto the carpet and took the white stationary game console out of the TV stand.

(Ehm... I think this goes in there? And this is the *powah*. Rethé, plug this into the *outlätt*.)

(Yeah, okay~)

Dolores prepared the console almost without trial-and-error, but through checking every cable carefully one by one, whereupon Fay widened her eyes a bit beside her.

(Dolores, why do you know how to connect this?)

Still on all fours, Dolores turned only her head around in reaction to the question, and smiled proudly.

(Fufu, as a matter of prudence, I paid attention, when Master Zenjirou took out or put away this device. Yes, all for the sake of tonight!)

Dolores threw out her chest ostentatious while on all fours, which could look quite

erotic depending on the viewpoint, yet there was not the slightest bit of sex appeal coming from her. Maybe because she was too slender? Or because she had nothing but the game console on her mind?

Anyway, it was very typical of Dolores to remember the connections of the game console in advance.

Amongst the “Three Troublemakers”, Dolores was considered to be a handful least of all not because she was more diligent than Fay or Rethé, but because she was especially “far-seeing”.

Just like this time. Fay and Rethé only looked at the current situation of playing with the game console as a “piece of good fortune”, but Dolores had anticipated it as a “possible scenario in the future”.

Put another way: She was belittling Zenjirou more than anyone.

In any case, they did not have to waste any time preparing the console by trial and error thanks to it, so it was a godsend.

(...And this goes in there... Now I only have to turn it on. Yes, it works!)

(Ohh!)

(Amazing, Dolores-chan~)

When the television displayed the start screen of the game, the three waiting maids could no longer contain their excitement.

(Controller! Where's the controller!)

(Hey, Fay, I'm first. I set up everything after all.)

(Ahaha, take it easy, Fay-chan. Dolores-chan deserves to have her turn first~)

Lowering their voices as much as possible, the three girls flushed their cheeks with enthusiasm and cautiously wielded the controllers of the game console.

The scene very much resembled a naughty kid playing with the game console in secret after the parents went to sleep.

Having been such a child, Zenjirou might have asked them to let him join on the spur of nostalgia, if he were to see this.

His elementary school days were a cherished memory, as he had often played a RPG in the living room behind his parents' back.

It would be a heart-warming scene reminiscing the days of childhood for him.

However, Zenjirou was not here. The waiting maids were all by themselves.

With a glint in their eyes from playing with the stationary game console for the first time, the maids operated their controllers.

They could only read the Arabic numerals. Japanese and occasionally displayed English were beyond their capabilities, of course. This being the case, they could only play by a trial-and-error method, but console games were made in such a way that you could figure out the correct controls before long by twiddling with them at random.

All the more so, because they were playing with a game console right now that utilized a so-called "motion controller", where a game functioned by just swinging the controller around.

The "Three Troublemakers" were abnormally quick learners, when it came to games, to begin with, so it did not take all that long until they were fully immersed in it.

About thirty minutes later.

(Fay, now!)

(Yeah, got it!)

Once the “Three Troublemakers” had mastered the motion controller, they were enjoying the game cheerfully.

At the moment, Fay and Dolores were standing in front of the TV screen, swinging their controllers. Rethé was sitting on the couch behind them and watching over their activities with a smile.

The current software in the console was a game that combined various sport games in one and they were playing a tennis doubles right now.

Fay and Dolores had teamed up and were competing against a computer-controlled doubles team.

On the screen, four characters were running around a tennis court and hitting a yellow tennis ball back and forth.

It was a close match by now, but their debut had been horrible. Their inexperience had yielded so many weird moves that you could expect the view count to skyrocket in no time, if you were to upload a video of it to the internet.



That much was self-evident, though. Let alone the controls, the three of them did not even know the rules of the sports known as “tennis”.

They tried to return the serve without letting it bounce first. On the other hand, they did not realize they were allowed to return everything else without a bounce, so they tried to return all shots only after they bounced once.

Fay and Dolores suffered one defeat after another before they finally managed a tennis rally worth of the name.

Even without understanding the rules of tennis or the displayed text, they realized that they had “lost” through their own crestfallen characters, the rejoicing opponent characters and the gloomy music, whose volume was turned down to a minimum.

As a result, their inherent competitive spirit was raised and they continued the tennis game until they won.

(Damn you!)

(Yes, good one, Fay!)

And now, on their memorable first winning streak of five games, both of them were covered in sweat on their forehead.

(Wow, you are both great~)

They were not allowed to make any loud noises, so Rethe said it with a soft voice while giving them a symbolic applause. Reminded of her existence thereby, Dolores turned around with a somewhat guilty expression.

(Ah, sorry. You wanna play, too, right.)

When all is said and done, the “Three Troublemakers” were getting along just fine.

Dolores and Fay were both unwittingly considerate of the somewhat mentally challenged Rethe, in particular.

(Here, Rethe. Do you want to keep playing this hit-the-ball-over-the-net game?)

Fay handed Rethe, who slowly stood up from the couch, her controller.

(Thanks, Fay-chan. I want to play the one Master Zenjirou plays ever so often~ You know, the one, where you have to hit a thrown ball with a round stick~)

(Okay. It should go like this... Yes, I switched it, Rethé!)

(Yay, thank you, Dolores-chan~)

Rethé started playing a baseball game.

This game of baseball was extremely simplified and the player could generally only act as the batter or pitcher. In other words, it was a one-on-one fight between the batter and pitcher, whereby you either threw or hit the ball.

At first, Rethé had faced off against the computer (with devastating results), but now, the three of them were playing against each other on a rotating basis.

The earlier tennis game had team play and the current baseball game had competitive play. Being able to play together with other people was the redeeming feature of the stationary game console.

Of course it was possible to do that with a number of portable game consoles as well, but Zenjirou was not such a game maniac that he would own numerous consoles of the same kind.

If anything, he was a casual gamer to the point that it came as a surprise that he actually owned more than one controller for the stationary game console. The only reason he had more than one was due to the fact that he had bought the console during his university days, a period where his friends would often stay over to play games.

In this sense, the girls were kind of lucky that they could play together now.

(Here I go!)

(Yeah, bring it on~ I, I hit it. I hit it, Fay-chan~)

Holding the controller in her hand, Fay mimicked throwing a ball, whereas Rethé swung the controller in her hand like a bat.

Lacking in the athletic department, Rethé had the worst ranking amongst the three, but she was always showing a happy smile during the game.

In terms of enjoyment, Rethé might be the clear winner here. It would be a different matter, if there was a prize such as snacks on the line like last time, but without that, you were a winner as long as you had fun.

And while the three of them were immersed in the game, the door of the living room was suddenly opened with a quiet clatter sound.

“Hii!?”

“...!”

“Wah?”

They automatically froze up, because they thought that the Supervisory Maid had come to scold them.

As far as they were concerned, they had obeyed her words and played quietly, but they could not deny it, either, that they let themselves get carried away. Maybe they had been too loud after all? Was the scary Supervisory Maid going to scold them again?

Harbouring these fears, the “Three Troublemakers” faced the door with a tense look, but fortunately enough, an unexpected person entered the room.

“Oh my? Fancy meeting you here.”

All three heaved a sigh of relief, when a waiting maid with unusual glamorous long blonde hair for the South Continent, deep-green eyes and distinctively white skin made an appearance.

“Oh, just Margret.”

“Sheesh, don’t scare us like that.”

“Fuwah~ I was startled~”

Although Margret was a waiting maid of the Inner Palace, she was not working under Zenjirou, but reported directly to Queen Aura. It was a somewhat special position, but she was not their superior, but rather an equated co-worker.

They usually did not deal with her all that much, because she was working directly under Aura, but Margret was sociable and friendly towards everyone on the surface, so Fay and the others paid no mind to her position and viewed her as a friend.

Margret widened her green eyes for a moment, when she saw the “Three Troublemakers” playing the television game, but she recovered her usual soft smile in no time and walked into the living room with smooth footsteps.

“Should you be doing this? If Her Majesty Aura or Mrs. Amanda were to find you here, you would not get away with a simple scolding, you know.”

Cocking her head, the blonde maid cautioned them like that, whereat Fay raised both her hand in protest, so that her short black hair dishevelled.

“No! We properly got permission from Mrs. Amanda!”

“Fay, you’re too loud. But she’s right, Margret. Master Zenjirou assigned us a job. We have to put his personal belongings to use while he’s away.”

Apparently it’s bad, when they just sit there collecting dust.”

“...I see now.”

In light of the answer from Dolores, Margret pondered for a moment, then showed understanding.

It did make sense at large, but she also knew how enviously the three of them were normally watching Zenjirou play the games, so she could see through the official pretext all the way to the true intentions from Zenjirou.

Anyway, there was not really any reason to reprimand them, when Zenjirou, the master of the Inner Palace, had given them permission for it.

“Well, if you say so. But please be mindful of the noise. Her Majesty Aura is resting next

door after all.”

“Ah, don’t tell me we could be heard in the hallway?”

The blood drained from Dolores’ brown face, whereupon Margret shook her head with a reassuring smile.

“No, fear not. You could not be heard. So please keep it at this sound level.”

To be honest, though, that was a lie. When she had grabbed the doorknob of the living room door, her sensitive ears had picked up some strange noises.

However, Margret had only managed to hear them, because she had undergone a spying training from an early age. From all the people inside the Inner Palace right now, she was the one and only one, who could pick up noises of this level.

“Hmm~? Then why are you here, Margret-chan~?”

Like always, Reth asked with an unimpassioned tone and Margret replied with a small smile.

“You could say, I am the same as you girls. Master Zenjirou requested me to do a special job as well.”

With these words, she headed straight for the refrigerator standing in one corner of the room.

“Eh?”

“Master Zenjirou did?”

“A request~?”

Giving the “Three Troublemakers”, who paused the game and cocked their head puzzled, a sidelong glance, the blonde waiting maid took a silver jug out of the refrigerator and poured its contents into a wooden cup.

The white fluid inside the silver jug was— Goat milk.

“Mm... Fuh...”

Margret downed the drink in one gulp without hesitation, whereupon the “Three Troublemakers” tossed their game controllers onto the couch and approached her.

“Ehm, did Master Zenjirou not say not to drink that?”

“Yeah. What’re you doing, Margret?”

“I- If we are allowed to drink it, I want to drink some, too~”

The blonde waiting maid shrugged her shoulders for a bit, when the “Three Troublemakers” pressed her, and replied.

“I am allowed to, because I am ‘used to’ it.”

Then she gave the cup smeared in white milk a distant look.

Zenjirou had forbidden the waiting maids to drink the goat milk, because the milk was still smelling of animal and grass and hence was hard to swallow.

There was no milk-producing livestock on the South Continent, so almost no one had tasted dairy products before.

It left a lasting impression, when you put unfamiliar food or drink into your mouth for the first time. If they were to drink the smelly goat milk first, it was quite likely they would develop an aversion towards milk products.

So Zenjirou was forbidding the waiting maids of the Inner Palace to drink the goat milk until the taste improved to a “passable” level, but Margret was an exception to that.

The blonde waiting maid was not drinking goat milk for the first time after all. For her, it was a “nostalgic” flavour she had drunken every day, when she was younger.

“Not fair~ So lucky~ You are so lucky, Margret-chan~”

Rethé was being the most jealous of them.

Her smile was normally the personification of kindness, but she liked cooking and was actually aiming to succeed the position of the cooking department head for real, so she had a weakness for unfamiliar ingredients.

Pressed by Rethé to the point that her large breasts were almost hitting her, Margret conveyed comfort while showing a wry smile.

"Still, I believe that Master Zenjirou is right in his decision. It still smells quite a bit and to be honest, I cannot really say that it is all that delicious."

"But I wanna drink it~"

"Please restrain yourself a little longer. Mr. Nicolai is doing his best to improve it, so it should not take all that long."

The subordinate of Princess Freya, a young man named Nicolai, was currently allocated to the Carpa Royal Family in order to teach them about the keeping of goats. He was a livestock expert with skills and knowledge transcending his young age.

When they adjusted the environment to the goats and changed their feed according to his instruction, the distasteful smell of the goat milk already started to thin out.

Moreover, Nicolai was apparently quite knowledgeable about making dairy products like cheese, yoghurt, butter and fresh cream as well.

Rethé would not really lose anything by postponing the sampling until then.

"...Okay, I get it. I will restrain myself~"

"Yes, good girl. Master Zenjirou seems to know a couple of deserts made with dairy products. If you drink the bad goat milk now and start to dislike dairy products altogether as a result, you might reject the deserts and not enjoy them anymore."

"Eh? New deserts? From Master Zenjirou?"

"I can't wait for that. We're counting on you then, Rethé."

Loosing themselves in the topic, the waiting maids were chatting away like always at some point and neglected the still running game console.

And then the time limit of one hour expired.

As a consequence, the door of the living room was knocked merciless.

“.....”

“.....”

“.....”

The “Three Troublemakers” were at a loss for words and faced the door, where unfortunately the very person they expected stood without saying a word.

Supervisory Maid Amanda, the person in charge of the whole Inner Palace, did not even bat an eye, when she saw that living room was not yet tidied up despite the time limit being up, and just declared indifferently.

“Fay, Dolores, Rethe and Margret. Clean up this place at once and then come to my office.”

“Eek.”

“Understood, Mrs. Amanda.”

“Very well~”

“...I apologize for the inconveniences.”

The “Three Troublemakers” and blonde waiting maid started to clean up with resigned expressions each.



PtFF by: traktorA7EN